

Ravenloft®
BOOKS

SHADOWBORN



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William W. Connors and Carrie A. Bebris

As the heavy music rolled through the air, darkness came on quickly. The faint residual rays of the departed sun were smothered by mournful notes that reminded Alexi of nothing so much as the groaning of a remorseful spirit. The shadows around them grew darker, the outlines of the trees more ghostly, the currents of the river more still.

A thick blanket of fog rose out of the water. it ascended as an unnatural mass of slowly churning vapors, the sort of effect Alexi had seen only in his nightmares. It swayed and rolled to the haunting music of Lysander's flute, mirroring the notes in coiling tendrils of fog.

Suddenly a dark shape stirred within the vapors.



SHADOWBORN

(Ravenloft - Book 18)

WILLIAM W. CONNORS
AND
CARRIE A. BEBRIS

PRELUDE



608, Barovian Calendar

They speak my name.

The word echoes across the infinite void that separates my realm from the world of man. Through the darkness of space and the ripples of time, I hear them. To be sure, the vast nothingness between us renders their pale voices indistinct. It muffles their chanting to an insectlike buzz, but my acute senses easily distinguish them.

They call to me.

Of course, they do not pronounce my name properly, those pitiful creatures of flesh and blood. Their mouths are as limited as their minds. My name holds sounds they cannot conceive, let alone voice. But still they attempt in vain to repeat the immortal syllables.

I cannot help but laugh.

They do not understand what they say, do not realize the peril in which they place themselves. By speaking my name, they invite me into their world. If I wished, I could follow the trail of their words across infinity and appear before them. I could amuse myself with the ridiculous sight of their trembling bodies. I could revel in the sweet taste of their horror, slake my thirst on their wretched spirits.

But something gives me pause.

How have they come to know my name? Only my most trusted allies know the appellation given me by my genitor so many millennia ago. If these insignificant creatures had the power and the knowledge, they could use my name to destroy me.

I must listen closely.

Their whispered voices chant more than my name. They speak other words, arcane words. They have woven my name into the fabric of an incantation. They seek to summon me.

Do they truly hope to force me to appear before them? Such incredible presumption must be suitably rewarded.

I will destroy them.

I shall respond to their summons. Crossing time and space is not difficult for one with the wisdom to do so. Long ago I learned the secret of navigating the eddies and currents of the universe.

Leaving behind my own realm, I ascend through layers of existence and sweep across realities unimagined by the pitiful creatures who call me. Dark shapes, some nearly as terrible as I, brush past me. But my business is not with them this day. I follow the sound of the tiny voices, the astral path their words cause to unfold before me like a ribbon of light. Ultimately this radiant trail carries me to a place of both darkness and light. It is far removed from my realm, but not so distant that I have not walked here before.

Is that the answer?

Perhaps that is how they learned my name. The wretched woman Shadowborn, who drove me back to my own realm, knew it. She understood power, and, mere speck though she was, she bent the forces of the cosmos to her will. Her eyes saw things invisible to other mortals, and her faith proved strong enough to resist even my power.

I believe I shall linger in this place after my business with the insects is done. I leave no debt

unsettled, and the Shadowborn woman has not yet been repaid for her actions.

But first I must attend to the fools who have called me here.

There are three of them, a trio of insignificant whelps gathered around a magical circle into which they propose to force me. I can feel their spell urging me on. It is but a faint tug, one I will break in a moment. For now, however, it amuses me to appear, just as they anticipated. I allow the faintest image of myself, a mere shadow, to take shape in the center of their circle.

To their credit, they do not falter. This trio of living, breathing creatures has faith in the frail spells they have woven. If they knew as much as they think they do, they would cry out in fear. They would beg for a merciful death and plead with me to let matters end there.

But they have not the wisdom.

The first mortal is a slender creature, tall and wiry. The aura of authority surrounding him tells me clearly that his will commands this doomed triad. It is his spell that calls me and his voice that first spoke my name.

“Ebonbane,” he intones, his voice rich with foolish confidence and paltry magic. “By all powers dark and unholy, I command thee to enter the circle!”

His presumption astounds me.

To one side of the wizard stands the second of this company, a well-muscled woman with hair as dark as the abyss. Her eyes, fierce and hard, watch everything as only a warrior’s do. In many ways, this female reminds me of the cursed Shadowborn. Her spirit, however, is as dark as that other woman’s was bright. Her hand rests on the hilt of her sword, a magical blade about which her dark aura hovers protectively. Clearly this blade was made by the warrior for her own use.

This one puts too much store in steel.

The last is a most curious creature. Short and pettily built, there is more to this mortal than bone and sinew. Her faith is strong. Doubtless this one is the minion of some dark god, a servant whose master even I would not dare cross. But this mortal is an insignificant follower; the power she serves will not even notice when I destroy her. The priestling has set spells upon this place, though their nature eludes me for the moment.

Her faith is nothing.

In a moment, I shall dash their enchantments aside. I will destroy them, one and all, before returning home. But I am curious. I want to know more about these lamentable fools. How did they come by my name? And having found it, how did they learn to give voice to it? To be sure, these wretches pose no threat to me, but do they forebode another menace? Does a power equal to me command them?

It seems unlikely.

Still, they have taken a great many magical precautions. Wards, impotent as they are, hang about this place. They have set runes upon the floor, and the tang of mystical herbs hangs in the air. Evidently this trio understands something of the peril I pose.

The wizard steps forward.

“Ebonbane, creature of darkness, servant of the ultimate evil, heed my call and appear before me,” he demands.

Once more I am astounded by the ego of this pitiful mortal. He repeats his command, pouring so much magical power into his words that even I sense them pulling at my heart. Ten centuries ago, when my power was less, I might have been unable to resist his magic. But that time is long past. My laughter fills the air. As it echoes from the walls of this abysmal place, I step fully into their universe.

Then I know the truth.

While the wizard’s magical wards alone cannot contain me, only now do I see the entirety of

their plan. In coming into their world, I failed to notice the steel prison they had built to entrap me. It tastes of the warrior, whose hand no doubt forged it. The magic of the priest hangs thick upon it, too. The spells of the wizard were nothing more than bait and smoke. They knew I would come to destroy them for speaking my name. The wizard laid himself before me as a decoy.

I have been as foolish as a new spawn!

A dozen spells rise up to contain me in this metal prison. Half of them I cast aside, but the others take hold. I am contained within an object of cold matter.

I should have destroyed them the instant they spoke my name. Had I not waited to investigate, but merely annihilated them, this outrage would not have come to pass. I should have suspected that they used my name with hidden purpose.

I howl with rage.

My spirit hammers at the metal shell in which they have trapped me. I batter it with all my will, but it does not yield. The mortals have done their work well. They have lured me into this world, and no act of mine can free me.

The smirks on their pathetic faces disgust me. They think they have triumphed, but they do not know the extent of my power. To be sure, I am contained.

But I am not controlled.

Abandoning for the moment my effort to escape, I focus my will upon the wizard. This was his plan; I can sense it. He is the one to whom the others look. He shall die first, that they might know the folly of their blind faith.

My will lashes out. Like the kiss of a whip, it snaps against the wizard's spirit and ruptures his heart. For the faintest fraction of an instant, his eyes bulge with fear. The first gasps of a startled scream trickle past his lips but are choked off when I drink of his soul. The taste is weak and unsatisfying, but not utterly without flavor.

As his flesh withers and draws tight to his bones, I turn my attention to the warrior.

Her sword flashes into the air. Though she responds quickly, her steel will not avail her now. My power overwhelms her. I tear her soul apart and drain away her life to satisfy my hunger. There is almost nothing to this one. No faith. No power. Just empty rage.

She falls to the ground before I even notice I have destroyed her.

The priest calls upon her god. Prayers pour forth from her lips, filling the air with words both dark and obscene. It is always the way with such creatures. When the end is upon them, they rely upon a power they have probably never even seen to save them. The priest's futile prayers go unanswered. She erects a pitiful magical barrier around herself, but I hurl it aside and inhale deeply of the living vapors within her.

Hers is the sweetest taste of all.

The room is quiet. The echoes of their screams have faded. In time, my rage cools, and I concede that I have no immediate means of escape. I am destined to remain in the realm of man for a time. Having accepted this fact, I determine to learn something of my surroundings. My prison seems stationary now, though I shall learn to move it about in time.

The moment has come for the dead to rise.

I reach out again with my will, tracing the fading outlines of the wizard and coiling mystical energies around his body. A moment of concentration, then a torrent of darkness surges into his willowy corpse. He cries out in agony, but it is only a remembered sensation. He can no longer feel true pain any more than he can know love or happiness. In death, he shall be a creature of the flesh only; the raw, untapped power of magic and the cosmos shall be denied him. He shall rule legions of minions, but only at my command.

The warrior rises next.

Hers is a physical existence. She lived for the sensual pleasures of the flesh and the thrill of battle. The former I will deny her in death, but of the latter I shall give her more than her share. Let her know the strength of the dead, but never again the heart of the living. She shall feast upon life and move as one with the darkness.

The last of them provides the most satisfaction of all.

It is the priest's magic that holds me within my prison. Thus she shall pay the dearest price for her act of treachery. I permit her to retain her power, but she shall pay homage only to me now. I shall be a god in her mind, and she shall do my work in this world. Her will shall be nothing but a reflection of my own, and her faith shall rest only in me.

Now the time has come for revenge.



626, Barovian Calendar

Scattered clouds, dark gray against the emptiness of a midnight sky, hovered above the cemetery. Shafts of moonlight lanced between them, falling occasionally upon curling wisps of fog that drifted on faint breezes, like restless spirits eternally searching for a place to rest. Dark shadows crept across headstones and tombs that ranged from days to centuries old.

Deep within one of these pools of darkness, Alexi Shadowborn held his sword with care so as not to let the moonlight catch the brightly polished steel. Pressed flat against the side of an old, almost forgotten crypt, he waited.

Alexi had chosen this position because it offered an unobstructed view of almost the whole graveyard. He could see the wrought-iron fence that bordered the cemetery and the cobblestone path that ran between the vaults. He could see the low patches of flowering shrubs, already losing their blooms at the first touches of the coming winter.

But most importantly he could see the freshly turned earth of three new graves.

There lay the bodies of three merchants. Two days ago, they had operated a small chandlery near the center of Brimstadt. Now, in the wake of a terrible fire, they were dead.

More than that, they were bait.

The young knight could not help but pity the trio of innocents—a man, his wife, and their sixteen-year-old daughter. They had done nothing wrong. They deserved the peace of eternal sleep. And he would make sure they got it.

As the distant church bells peeled the hour of one o'clock, Alexi released a low, quiet sigh. He had been standing here since sunset. Between the chill night air and the hours of inactivity, his muscles were beginning to cramp. He had worked them as best he could, tensing and relaxing them without moving, but it was becoming impossible to remain still any longer. He shifted his weight, careful to avoid making too much noise in his chain mail. His limbs complained but were thankful for the activity.

Almost as soon as he had begun to move, however, Alexi froze. Something new had come into sight, something that caused the blood in his veins to run colder than the October breezes around him.

The grave robbers had come.

It was a revolting enterprise, grave robbing. Alexi had difficulty understanding what drove a man to violate another's final resting place. How could the desire for a gold pocket watch or an emerald ring be strong enough to commit one of the church's ultimate sins? Perhaps, he considered, he might think differently had he been born into the lower classes. He had never wanted for anything, never known hunger or lacked coal on a winter's night. But try as he might, he could not comprehend the heinous act.

For the past month, these villains had preyed upon the cemeteries of Brimstadt, violating the sacred graves of the newly dead. They had torn open a dozen caskets, stealing not only valuables laid to rest with the dead but the bodies as well.

Of course, the constabulary had taken steps to thwart them, but the only result had been two more graves for the fiends to loot. After that, Brimstadt's mayor took the problem to Lord Vincent, Alexi's father and the master of these lands. That had been two days ago, the same day of the fire at the chandlery.

The knight's fingers tightened on his sword hilt as he watched the dark shapes move from headstone to headstone. He would wait a little longer, allowing them to make their guilt evident, before striking. They would die quickly, convicted by their own actions. And the name of Shadowborn would once more be praised by the people of Avonleigh.

Alexi did not undertake this mission to attain any measure of personal glory or fame. For the past two years, since being knighted on his sixteenth birthday, he had fought his battles for a nobler purpose. He aspired to become a champion of Belenus, the sun god, and had persevered to prove himself worthy. His blade had won him the respect of friend and foe alike. Already he had taken the oaths of fealty and piety that bound him for life to the service of Belenus. Only one step remained.

In one week's time, the High Mother of the church would celebrate Alexi's Rite of Ascension. During the ritual, Alexi would take his place among the elite Knights of the Circle, and Belenus would accept Alexi as one of his holy paladins.

Paladin. The word rang sweet in Alexi's ears. He would become an instrument of Belenus, charged with protecting the Great Kingdom in his name. For a warrior, there was no higher calling. He answered it willingly, as his mother had before him.

As a paladin, he would be called upon to face and defeat the enemies of the church—as he was tonight. He watched the shadowy shapes of the grave robbers gather around the resting places of the Chandlers. He counted four vandals. They seemed quick, but they moved with an odd, rolling gait.

If they were defenseless, he would give them a chance to offer up final prayers before carrying out the only sentence Belenus allowed for grave robbing. If they were armed, they might put up a good fight—the sort of battle his mother, the renowned Kateri Shadowborn, was said to have taken in stride.

Alexi wondered whether she would be proud of him. He had done all he could to pattern his life after hers. He had studied sword fighting extensively, and yet he found time to read the scriptures, just as she had. There was not a single passage in *The Book of Radiance* that he could not quote verbatim. He wished he could have known Kateri Shadowborn. He wished she had lived long enough to see the infant she bore grow to manhood.

Three of the grave robbers commenced clawing at the freshly turned soil. They made no use of shovels or picks, but tore up great blocks of earth with their bare hands. As grave robbers went, Alexi thought, these seemed remarkably unprepared.

The fourth intruder crouched low, like a wild animal, and twisted his head back and forth. He appeared to be acting as a lookout, but the snorting and sniffing sounds he made reminded Alexi of a slaving dog trying to catch a scent. What manner of grave robbers had he come across?

As if in answer to Alexi's question, the clouds parted for a fraction of a second, and a shaft of pale amber light fell upon the quartet. Alexi shuddered.

These were no mere grave robbers.

Although once they might have been men, the creatures digging at the soil could claim that status no more. Their flesh, gray and mottled like half-cured leather, stretched tightly across bones that seemed unnaturally sharp and angular. Their mouths were elongated, devoid of lips and filled with teeth that reminded Alexi of a viper's fangs. Long, wicked claws—talons, really—topped slender, skeletal fingers. Their eyes were black like those of a snake, but bloated and swollen. Gruesome tattoos, horned skulls the color of fresh blood, adorned their foreheads.

Alexi realized that he stood in the presence of the living dead. Clearly these were ghouls—cannibalistic creatures who hungered eternally for the flesh of the newly deceased. In two years of campaigning, he had never faced such horrors. Though he knew that these creatures were themselves victims, slain by some master of the dark arts and then brought back to serve his

unholy needs, he could not help recoiling in disgust. A gasp that was half fear and half revulsion escaped his lips.

At that faint sound, the sentinel's head snapped around. His baleful gaze fell upon Alexi and a terrible howl shattered the crisp autumn air. The four creatures sprang forward at once, like jackals attacking a wounded animal. In an impossibly short time they had covered the thirty yards that separated them from the no longer hidden Alexi.

The sentinel had started from a few yards closer than his foul companions, enabling him to reach the knight first. This cost him his life—or what remained of it. As the creature crashed down upon Alexi, the would-be paladin forced his blade through its ribs with a sickening grinding, cracking sound. The monster twitched spasmodically and released an ear-piercing shriek.

Alexi rolled to the side, deflecting as much of the beast's momentum as he could. Even after impaling itself on his blade, however, the ghoul struck with enough force to knock the knight off-balance. Only the fact that he was braced against the side of the crumbling mausoleum kept Alexi from falling.

As he kicked the now-inanimate body from his sword, the other three ghouls reached him. They lashed out, scraping their talons across the gray metal of his breastplate, but failed to find any exposed flesh.

Knowing that he couldn't allow them to pin him against the wall, Alexi ducked his head low and drove forward with his shoulder. He struck one ghoul in the abdomen and forced his way past the fell creature. The blow would have knocked the wind out of a living opponent, but Alexi knew all too well that these creatures no longer needed air to survive. Still, the impact proved great enough to spin the creature halfway around and cause it to teeter.

As soon as he was clear of the horrid trio, the knight whirled about. His blade swept through the air, flashing as it cleaved a shaft of moonlight, and bit deeply into the neck of the off-balance ghoul. The creature's eyes bulged, but quickly lost any sense of animation that might have remained in them. By the time his slaving companions neared, the decapitated body had already struck the ground.

With half his enemies dispatched, Alexi quickly assessed his situation. He was still in great danger. He knew, from the tales of other knights, that even a single ghoul made a formidable enemy. He held his blade steady, keeping its point aimed at the space between the two animated corpses. No matter which one struck at him first, he would be able to defend himself.

The two creatures came at him in unison.

Alexi stepped to the right and lunged forward. His blade pierced the body of a ghoul, spilling black ichor onto the ground. The creature thrashed about wildly in an attempt to escape the deadly steel but managed only to wound itself further. Alexi withdrew his blade with a vicious lateral sweep, tearing a great gash in the creature's gray-green flank, and the ghoul fell to the ground with a howl of pain. Seconds later, it grew still.

The remaining ghoul showed no sign of fear at the demise of its three companions. As Alexi finished dispatching its ally, the last surviving beast raked its filthy talons across his face. The blow lacked any real force, but the wounds burned intensely. Alexi clenched his teeth in pain and tasted blood at the corner of his mouth.

Before his heart had beaten twice more, the knight realized his peril. A deathly stiffness crept through his body, spreading outward from the lacerations on his cheek. He had only seconds before the ghoul's paralytic poison would leave him defenseless.

Panic threatened to overwhelm him, but the young knight fought it back. If he was going to survive, he would have to keep calm and act quickly.

The ghastly creature reached out for him, seeming to sense that victory lay nearly in its grasp.

Alexi tried to bring his sword into play, but the stiffness in his right arm proved too great to overcome. Even as the hilt slipped free of his numb fingers, his left hand drew a long, sharply pointed dagger from his belt.

The ghoul grabbed him in its powerful hands and opened its mouth wide. Needlelike teeth gleamed yellow in the darkness as the creature leaned toward his throat. Alexi saw that the red tattoo on the beast's forehead seemed to glow as if it were aflame.

At that moment, Alexi struck. With the last of his strength, he brought the dagger up, driving the blade through the ghoul's throat and up into its brain. The light drained from the death's head until it looked like a black brand.

The creature shuddered. Its grip loosened, and gravity drew it down to crash on the cold earth.

Alexi Shadowborn was not far behind.

The ghoul's toxin had spread throughout his body now, making even the slightest movement almost impossible. Breathing became unthinkable difficult, and even the beating of his heart was a taxing burden.

Without warning, a terrible pain swept through his body. Even in Alexi's state of virtual paralysis, its intensity forced him to spasm and convulse. Images of death and burial flooded his mind—the ghouls' human deaths, before their corruption. He experienced the anguish of their demises, the suffocating closeness of a casket, the endless cold of the grave's eternal night.

And then a new sensation filled his spirit. It began as a nagging twinge in his gut, but grew quickly into an agonizing hunger. Alexi retched as the taste of rotting carrion filled his mouth. For a brief second, the hunger slackened, only to return even greater than before. Alexi realized that he was vicariously experiencing the ghouls' endless curse of feasting on human corpses.

Then came a series of stabbing pains. One after another, he felt the sting of his own blade as it laid each of the dark creatures to rest.

And then it was over.

He lay still on the cold earth as a chill autumn wind swept through the cemetery. He tried to close his eyes, but found that the toxin made even that simple task impossible. He was utterly helpless now. If any other ghouls lurked in the cemetery, he was theirs for the taking.

As the minutes crawled past, he prayed to Belenus for protection. In some corner of his mind, he wished that the ghoul's toxin also caused unconsciousness. He would lie here now for hours before the venom either receded from his blood or killed him. And all that time he would be fully aware.

Alexi watched the yellow face of Brigit, the moon goddess, trace its nightly arc across the sky. From time to time he thought he saw a dark shape moving about in the graveyard. It was little more than a sensation, something perceived at the very edge of his vision. He strained to redirect his gaze to confirm or allay his suspicions. Perhaps, he hoped desperately, the moonlight was merely playing tricks on his vulnerable imagination.

But when he heard the snapping of a twig and the rustling of leaves, he knew he was not alone.



Alexi sat up sharply, throwing off his covers and filling his lungs with a sharp gasp. His heart hammered so loudly that it roared in his ears.

It took him several seconds to recognize the familiar sights of his bedroom. He was home, safe inside Shadowfast, his ordeal in the graveyard almost a week past.

His shoulders sagging in relief, he dabbed rivulets of sweat from his brow with the edges of his bedspread. With a shaking hand, he poured himself a glass of water from the crystal pitcher at his bedside. He sipped it slowly, calming himself with a series of deep breaths.

For as long as Alexi could remember, he had been troubled by nightmares. Usually they involved vague fears and shapeless dangers that he could not recall clearly upon waking. Since his battle in the graveyard, however, Alexi's nocturnal enemies had worn the unmistakable faces of the living dead. Night after night, ravenous ghouls loomed over him as he lay sprawled in the dirt, unable to defend himself. Worse yet were the dreams in which he became one of them.

Alexi shuddered at the memory of his encounter with the ghouls. Brigit's reign had never seemed so long as it did while he lay helpless on the cold ground, a hostage to the terrors of his imagination. He never learned who, or what, had hidden in the shadows. By the time the toxin had worn off, his mysterious companion was gone.

Setting down the half-drained glass, Alexi climbed out of bed. His sweat-soaked nightshirt stuck to his body. He shook the soft cotton fabric loose as he walked to the bell cord and rang for breakfast.

From an intricately carved cedar chest he withdrew black hose, a flowing yellow chemise, and a wasp-waisted black doublet. He dressed pensively, his mind still occupied by the ghouls.

Though the grave robbers had been Alexi's first encounter with the living dead, he knew other knights who had faced them in combat. Alexi had heard about ghouls' ability to paralyze their opponents. When their toxin had taken effect, he at least had known what was happening to him.

But he had not been prepared for the horror of vicariously experiencing their deaths and ghoulish existences. None of his comrades-in-arms had ever spoken of such an affliction in the wake of a battle with the creatures. And unlike the toxin, which had worn off in hours, this legacy of the ghouls had continued for nearly a week. Would it torment him forever?

As Alexi laced up his sleeves, he resolved to ask Dasmaraia about the experience the next time he had an opportunity. She had faced ghouls in battle before. As his friend, she might be more likely to reveal truths that others would not.

A sharp rapping sounded on the door.

Alexi shook off the dark thoughts that crowded his mind. "Good morning, Ferran," he said as his young squire entered with his breakfast, a generous combination of fruits, berries, and freshly baked rolls.

"I was beginning to think you would never wake up." Ferran placed the tray on Alexi's writing desk.

Alexi glanced up from his laces. "Not all knights would countenance such insolence from their squires," he chided gently. Picking up a silver brush, he watched Ferran in the mirror as he smoothed his hair.

"Not all squires serve their brothers." Ferran stole a plump grape from the tray and popped it into his mouth. "And so long as you let me get away with it, I intend to exercise my privileges as a younger sibling."

The knight rolled his eyes, then turned to regard his brother. The youth reminded Alexi of himself a few short years ago, at least in temperament. In appearance, Ferran shared Alexi's shoulder-length blond hair and pale gray eyes, but the physical resemblance ended there. Ferran was more angular than the muscular knight, his lithe body showing the clean lines of an acrobat instead of the intimidating bulk of a warrior. It was little wonder that young Ferran favored the bow over the sword.

Just as his mother does, Alexi thought. Ferran follows his mother's path, as I follow mine. Though Alexi and Ferran had been raised as brothers, in truth they were only cousins. Alexi's aunt and uncle had adopted him when his real mother, Kateri Shadowborn, could not raise him because she was fighting in the Heretical Wars—the wars that had killed her. Alexi had no memory of his birth mother, and all he knew of his real father was that he, like Kateri, had been a soldier.

Vincent and Victoria Shadowborn were the only parents Alexi had ever known, and they had given him all the love and attention they showed their other two children. Alexi thought of them as his real mother and father, and of his cousins as his true brother and sister, and he felt perfectly natural in doing so. Yet as the day of his Ascension ceremony drew closer, he found himself increasingly identifying with the woman who had given him life.

Alexi returned the brush to its place beside the washbasin and reached for his leather belt and scabbard. As usual, Ferran beat him to it. Without comment, the young squire wrapped the thick black band around Alexi's waist.

"You're becoming a good squire," Alexi said. He resisted the impulse to reach out and tousle his brother's hair. Ferran was too mature for such a gesture. But this morning Alexi felt old, as if the span of years between him and Ferran had doubled. As if his encounter with the ghouls had aged him.

Alexi sat down to break his fast as Ferran fetched a pair of calf-high boots. Once Alexi donned them, the squire buffed the leather with a soft cloth until they shone like black mirrors. All the while, Ferran chattered on in a seemingly endless array of subjects, but Alexi was still too preoccupied with ghoulish thoughts to offer much more than an occasional comment.

As the clock in his room chimed nine, Alexi emerged from his bedroom, with Ferran close behind.

As he stepped on the burgundy carpet that ran along the hall outside his room, a flash of motion sprang toward Alexi. He barely had time to brace himself for the impact when the so-called Terror of Shadowfast hurled itself at him. Still, the reflexes of a warrior proved useful even when his sword lay untouched in its scabbard. He caught the blur in his arms and swept it into an upward spiral.

"Good morning!" shouted a high-pitched voiced.

"Good morning, Aurora," said Alexi with a smile. He hugged his sister tightly and kissed her on both round cheeks. She squeezed him back, wrapping her pudgy arms around his neck.

Alexi lowered Aurora to the floor and wiped away the remnants of her sloppy kisses with the back of his sleeve. "How are you today?"

"Okay," said the child with a smile, "but I think you're in trouble!"

"Why is that?" he asked as they reached the top of a wide stairway. As they descended it, Aurora leapt onto the banister and slid down its long, graceful curve. Alexi shook his head, unable to guess how many times their parents had told her not to do that.

"Mom and Dad are waiting for you in the li-berry."

"It's pronounced 'library,' " Alexi called after her as the little girl dropped off the banister and dashed down the hall.

By the time he reached the library doors, Aurora was already inside. She tried to climb into her

I mother's lap, but Lady Victoria stopped her with a curt I gesture. The round-faced girl pushed out a pouting lip, I but finally tossed herself on a plush pillow near the hearth.

"Good morning, Mother," said Alexi. "And to you, Father." The musty smell of books bade Alexi its own welcome. The library had always been one of his favorite places, offering a wealth of lore about the Great Kingdom, the province of Avonleigh, the Shadowborn family, or any other subject he wished to study. It was here that he had studied the scriptures that helped guide him toward paladinhood.

Victoria Shadowborn smiled and stood, unfolding her wispy form like an elegant spider. She was no beauty, having always been tall and gangly, but she was graceful and in her younger days a champion archer. The velvet gown she wore fit snugly at her waist and was shaped to enhance a figure that could at best be described as boyish. Her hair, slightly darker than that of her children, formed amber curls woven into an ornate silver tiara.

After embracing Alexi in a tight hug, she stepped away from her oldest son. With gliding steps she slipped over to the mantel and reached for a long, slender mahogany case. Lifting it smoothly, she carried it to where her son was seated and placed it on the table before him. The gold lock glowed warmly in the firelight.

Alexi cocked his head to one side as he studied the object. He had never seen this particular case before and was taken by its elegance. Golden braces held the dark wood firmly in place at the corners; a gleaming sunburst latch sealed it securely in the front. But nothing indicated what the box might contain or where it had come from.

Ferran leaned forward alertly. His eyes sparkled as they always did when presented with a mystery, large or small. Alexi had to smile at the eagerness in his brother's face. Everyone could see that it was all the squire could do to keep from grabbing for the box himself.

"This is for you," said his mother in a strangely reverent voice. "Your father and I have kept it to ourselves for a good many years, waiting until the time seemed right to make you a gift of it. With your Ascension ceremony scheduled for tomorrow, I can't imagine a better time."

Lord Vincent produced a small golden key from his pocket. It bore the radiant candle icon that had been the mark of the Shadowborn family for generations. He smiled fondly at his eldest son and extended a broad, muscular hand. Light from the fire danced brightly on the key. As Alexi reached out to accept it, Lord Vincent seemed to hesitate. A distant look, which carried with it the impression of almost forgotten memories, came into his eyes.

"I recall a day in autumn when you were Aurora's age," said Alexi's father. His daughter smiled brightly at the mention of her name in the hope that he was beginning a story about her. She stirred on her overstuffed pillow, stroking the golden cat that had found its way into her lap. "The first snow of autumn had fallen, and we were taking a walk in the woods south of here. When we came upon the family crypt, you asked what it was."

"I remember," said Alexi. It was an important day in his life, but he didn't realize that his father had taken any notice of it.

"Have I been there?" asked Aurora. He mother hushed her, and Lord Shadowborn went on with his tale.

"I tried to explain to you that your ancestors slept there when they had grown tired of living. You wanted to see them. I don't think you really understood what I meant."

Alexi chuckled. "No, I guess I didn't."

"We went inside, and you made me read you the names on all the vaults. It must have taken an hour. I had to tell you who each person was and what kind of life he or she had led. When we came to the chamber that bore your mother's name, you made me stop."

"It was... different," said Alexi, recalling the pull he'd sensed upon seeing Kateri Shadowborn's name etched in the cold marble. "There was something about it."

“So you said,” Lord Vincent responded. “That day marked the first time I ever told you about your real mother and her part in the Heretical Wars.”

“But not the last,” Alexi said. From that day on, tales of Kateri Shadowborn, her travels, and her war against evil had been regular bedtime fare for Alexi. Before long, the young boy had decided that he himself would become a holy warrior, a paladin, just like his mother had.

It was this early determination, no doubt, that resulted in Alexi being one of the youngest candidates ever to enter the service of Belenus. Tomorrow, when he underwent the ritual of Ascension, he would become the second youngest paladin ever to join the holy order of the Circle, an achievement bested only by his mother.

“I wish I could have known her,” said Alexi softly.

“She visited you as often as she could,” said Lady Victoria, the firelight playing across the angles of her face. “But the Great Kingdom needed her more. When the war ended, she hoped to spend more time with you. First, however, she had some mysterious mission to complete. She stopped here on her way south to say good-bye. You were about two at the time. We never saw her again.”

“At least, not until they brought her body home for burial,” amended Lord Vincent. A somber silence spread like a shroud across the room. Before the mood became overpowering, however, Aurora’s voice danced into the air.

“Can Alexi open his present now?”

Lady Victoria smiled. “She’s right, Vincent. Let’s not have our celebration turn into a wake.”

Vincent nodded, moving toward a small table. Alexi noticed for the first time that it held a bottle of deep red wine and several glasses. His father poured wine for each member of his family. Even Aurora received a small splash in a gleaming crystal glass, something that made her eyes sparkle.

The master of Shadowfast raised his glass. It flashed in the light of the fire. “A toast,” he proclaimed. The others lifted their glasses as well. “To Alexi Shadowborn, my eldest son, who shall become the second of our family to wear the armor of a paladin and ride under the standard of the Circle. May he bring hope to all the people of the Shadowlands and despair to all the enemies of the Great Kingdom. Belenus willing, his name shall be known and his songs sung in all the thirteen provinces.”

Alexi’s heart swelled as his family voiced their approval of Lord Vincent’s sentiments. He sipped his wine, thanking Belenus for delivering him into the care of such a supportive family. He would do his best to make them proud.

“Yuck!” cried Aurora. “I don’t like this stuff!” She held her glass at arm’s length and regarded it with a disapproving eye. She turned an accusing glare on Ferran. “You said it was like grape juice!”

As laughter filled the room, Lord Vincent tossed the golden key into the air. It tumbled twice, flashing brightly in the firelight, before Alexi caught it.

He turned it over, admiring the elegance of its insignia, then slipped it into the lock. There followed a faint scraping noise, a sharp click, and the snap of the lock popping open. Alexi slipped the lock from the latch and placed it carefully on the table. Like the key, it was a work of art and deserved delicate treatment.

The lid of the case swung open easily. Inside, resting on a bed of black velvet, lay a gleaming sword. Its slender blade was flawless and untarnished, decorated with a delicate inscription of gently brushed characters. Light seemed to pool up and run along it like quicksilver, trickling into every crevice of the ethereal traces engraved upon it.

“This was my sister’s sword,” said Lady Victoria. “It even has its own name: Corona.”

Corona. The word resonated through Alexi, a warmth that started in his heart and spread like

the rays of Belenus.

With reverence, he lifted the weapon from its case. He slipped his fingers into the exquisite pommel, which was in the shape of a striking hawk, and nodded in appreciation. Not merely beautiful, the sword was also a masterpiece of design. It seemed to weigh nothing in his hand. As he shifted it back and forth, it appeared to move almost before he willed it to do so.

Aurora pushed her way past Ferran and tilted her head to read the inscription on the blade. “Those aren’t real words,” she declared.

“Sure they are,” said Ferran, “but they’re in the Holy Script, just like the *Libram of Belenus*. Alexi can read it, can’t you?”

Alexi bent forward over the blade. As he read the runes, which were indeed in the language of Belenus himself, he translated them for his family. “ ‘Blazing fire in the east, shining steel from the west, luminous valor from the north, radiant glory in the south.’ ”

“What’s that mean?” demanded Aurora.

“The words tell the story of the sword’s making, clear,” said Lady Victoria. “Corona was forged for your aunt Kateri by the armorers of the Eastern Kingdom. They used special ore brought by traders from Avonleigh, which they call the Western Lands—that’s the fire from the east and the steel from the west. They presented the blade to Kateri as a reward for one of her adventures in their land. My sister took it with her when she rode from the north to the south in order to join in the great crusades against the heretics of the Southern Empire.”

As Lady Victoria spoke, Alexi gently swept the sword from side to side, testing its balance and flexibility. Only the weaponsmiths of the east could make blades this light and responsive. The sword fairly danced through the air.

“No one has worn this blade in over fifteen years,” said Lord Vincent. “Not since Kateri died with it in her hand.” He turned to Alexi. “We have kept Corona for you these many years. Now that you are about to take your place in the Circle, we thought the time had come for you to carry it.”

The full magnitude of the gift rippled through Alexi. He held the very weapon that Kateri Shadowborn had brandished in countless battles. Corona, the enemy of all things dark and evil. Bards sang nearly as many ballads about the legendary “blazing sword” as about the paladin who had wielded it.

And now the blade belonged to him. “I’ll do my best to live up to it,” said Alexi.

“Is it really magical?” asked Ferran. Like Alexi, he had grown up hearing the stories of Kateri Shadowborn charging into battle with the radiant Corona held high.

“Unfortunately, I myself have never seen any sign of magic,” said Lord Vincent. “I think the stories of ‘the blazing sword’ may be slightly exaggerated.”

“Magic or not,” said Alexi, “I’ve never held better.”

“And I daresay that it’s never been held by better,” said Lady Victoria. She stepped forward and wrapped Alexi in a warm hug. “Congratulations, my son,” she said. “Great things lie ahead for you.”

And tomorrow, Alexi thought, on the day of his Ascension, they would begin.

THREE



The darkness closed in on him from all sides. To the left and right, ahead and behind, even above and below, it was a palpable barrier that threatened to crush the life from him. Alexi released an involuntary cry of helpless despair.

Something surged forward from the darkness, withdrawing from his sight the moment it became visible. He had the faintest impression of a humanoid shape, one with eyes that burned a malevolent scarlet. The sickly sweet odor of corruption assaulted his nostrils, revealing at once the nature of his unseen enemies.

Ghouls.

A sharp pain forced a choked gasp from his throat. Keen talons slashed out from the endless night to taste the soft flesh at the back of his neck. He whirled quickly about, feeling for the wound but finding no laceration or trace of blood. Despite this evidence to the contrary, he knew that the pain had been real.

Dim shadows moved against the eternal blackness in which he stood. Their near-invisibility made him doubt his own senses.

But he knew they were there, just as he knew that the lingering spirit of every evil thing he had ever vanquished was with them. Just beyond his vision, Alexi could feel them circling about. If he let his guard down, even for a moment, those terrible creatures would attack.

"Why can't you rest?" he cried. "I put you in your graves! One and all you should dwell in the Kingdom of Arawn. Go to him! Go to the master of the dead and leave me in peace!"

The endless abyss of darkness offered no surface to reflect his words. But while his own voice did not echo back, his cries did not go unanswered. Distant, booming laughter broke through the darkness. Ringing like the thunder of an approaching storm, it washed over Alexi and chilled his heart.

He shuffled slowly across the blackness beneath him, muscles tensed in anticipation. He kept his hands out, fists tightly balled, ready to fend off anything that might charge at him. He had heard this distant laughter before, but never had the master of this dark place shown himself.

Perhaps tonight would be the night.

There was a change in the darkness. Something seemed to trouble the restless spirits. Alexi knew that a presence lingered here that had never walked these nightmare lands before.

He whirled about.

A dark figure, perhaps nothing more than an extension of the blackness itself, stood before him. He could not discern it clearly, for its indistinct edges seemed to dissipate even as he looked upon them. Alexi's mind formed the impression of a man draped in nothing but black robes. Like the ghouls, the figure was a patch of darkness against the sea of nothing that surrounded Alexi.

The warrior remembered the night in the cemetery, when he had seen some mysterious shape moving at the edge of his vision. Was this his unknown visitor?

"Who are you?" he cried.

The rippling shape made no reply. It raised a slender arm, folds of dark robes shifting like soundless waves on a midnight sea, and pointed a gnarled, gray finger at Alexi.

As the mysterious stranger made this simple gesture, Alexi's worst fears were realized. The dark shapes of the ghouls, drained of all color in this landscape of gray and black, moved forward. Behind them, old enemies who had fallen before Alexi's blade closed in. Unarmored and

weaponless, the knight helplessly waited for his former opponents to repay him for their deaths.

Despair seized him. Alexi sensed that he had been here before, many times, and that this was how the struggle always ended—with his death.

Suddenly he felt a shift in the forces surrounding him. The hooded figure, he realized, was not pointing him out to his enemies. Instead, it was attempting to direct Alexi's attention to something else. He lowered his gaze, following the direction of the figure's outstretched finger.

Corona.

Alexi wore the gleaming sword and its scabbard at his waist. He blinked in disbelief. Never before had he been able to carry a weapon into his final confrontation with the dark remnants of his enemies.

The black shades surged forward.

First came the quartet of ghouls, his most recent enemy. A dozen other creatures, all of them evil to the core, appeared behind them, their images less vivid.

Alexi reached for Corona. The instant the weapon cleared the scabbard, a brilliant flash tore through the landscape of endless black. Light fanned out from the radiant blade in all directions, driving back the evil essences.

Faith swept through Alexi. He could triumph over these fell creatures in this nightmare realm just as he had in life. Through the sword Corona, Belenus would aid him.

He swept the blade at his nearest enemy. As it struck the ghoul, a loud crash sounded.

With a start, Alexi awoke.

He lay safe in his bed. Eyes blinking, he scanned the room. The mirror, his night table, everything was in its proper place.

Except the crystal pitcher. With a wave of regret, Alexi saw it lying smashed on the floor. He must have knocked it over during his nightmare.

He closed his eyes in frustration. He'd hoped that he could awake on the morning of his Ascension, at least, with no disturbing dreams. That somehow the sanctity of this day would keep the darkness at bay.

This dream had been different, however. Corona had enabled him to vanquish his enemies. Perhaps its presence signified that he had conquered the nightmares as well. Perhaps today, when Belenus accepted him as one of his holy champions, the heaviness that hung over his spirit would be lifted.

Alexi lit a candle and carefully slipped out from under his bedding to clean up the broken crystal. When he finished, he stepped across the room and opened the shutters.

Instead of the rolling expanse of Shadowfast bathed in Brigit's light, there was only darkness. And a face.

Alexi recoiled in horror. It was so twisted and evil a visage that his heart froze. In a fraction of a second, it vanished.

Liquid darkness poured into the room through the open window. Alexi tried to step back but discovered that the thick, viscous liquid had already flowed around his ankles. Like amber clinging to the legs of an unwary insect, it held him fast.

He cried out as the incredibly cold blackness rose around his body. Gritting his teeth in agony, he felt it pass his knees. By the time it swirled around his waist, he had lost all sensation in his feet.

As it reached his chest, his heartbeat slowed.

In a last attempt to free himself, he thrashed back and forth frantically. But his efforts proved futile. The all-powerful evil of the night had won. Alexi's triumph in his dream had been nothing more than a fleeting illusion.

In the seconds before the darkness rose above his mouth, Alexi's fear overcame him. He screamed in unbridled terror, forgetting the courage and valor that was the heart of a paladin.

And again he was in his bed.

Alexi sat up with a jolt, his heart pounding hard enough to explode. He glanced wildly about his room, unable to believe its perfectly mundane state.

His breathing slowed as he realized what had happened. He'd merely had another nightmare. Or, more accurately, a nightmare within a nightmare. When he thought he woke up, he'd actually still been dreaming.

As a cold autumn breeze drifted through the open window, he reached shaking hands toward the pitcher of water on his night table. When his fingers touched nothing but air, he looked down.

And saw the shards of smashed crystal littering the floor.



Alexi raised his head as the last words of his whispered prayers passed his lips. He rose from his knees, making a circle with two extended fingers to end his entreaty to Belenus. His muscular form, made even more impressive by the gleaming ornamental plate armor that he wore, seemed to fill the entire chapel.

His supplications were simple and direct. He prayed for guidance; he prayed for direction; he prayed for the blessing of his god. In just one more hour, the eye of Belenus would reach its zenith in the sky. At that moment, the roof of the great temple would open, and he would be officially accepted into the Circle. He would become a paladin.

And Alexi would prove himself worthy of the honor. He would do the work of Belenus no matter where it took him, and wield Corona in the name of his god.

Even as he imagined the life upon which he was about to embark, Alexi heard someone else enter the chapel. He turned slowly, expecting to see a member of the sisterhood who tended the Great Temple. To his surprise, however, the warrior found himself facing the silhouette of another figure in armor nearly as grand as his own. The black shape of a diving hawk adorned a red surcoat. He recognized the armor immediately.

“Dasmaria!” Alexi’s face broke into a smile.

At the mention of her name, the other knight lifted her helmet. The light of a dozen votive candles splashed the silver highlights in her short-cropped locks. As the helmet came completely clear, a single long coil of inky black hair fell free, draping itself across her shoulder like the tail of a lounging panther.

From nearly the first moment he’d seen her, Dasmaria’s features had captured his attention. They were fine and angular, as if set into place by an artist whose eye for beauty was matched only by a keen sense of precision. Her piercing eyes glowed so darkly that they looked like opals against the rich olive complexion of her skin. She was a child of the southern provinces, where the gaze of Belenus was hot and unyielding.

Dasmaria stepped toward him and hesitantly leaned forward to plant a light kiss on his cheek.

At the unexpected show of affection, Alexi’s pulse quickened. He caught her gaze. “Did that mean what I hope it does?”

She shook her head. “It’s for luck,” she said, stepping back. “That’s all. I need more time to think about... the rest. You understand?”

His spirit deflated a little. After years of campaigning with Dasmaria, Alexi had grown to feel more than friendship for her. When he admitted his feelings two weeks ago, the news had taken Dasmaria by surprise. Alexi had never seen the practiced warrior flustered until that moment, when she’d stammered that she needed a chance to examine her own feelings.

He grazed her cheek with his fingertips. “Take all the time you need, Das. I’m in no rush.”

She broke off their gaze, turning to set her helmet on a nearby pew. “So—” she cleared her throat—“today’s the day.” She turned back to him and smiled. Her teeth were bright against her dark lips. “You’ve worked hard for this, Alexi. I know you’ll make everyone in the Shadowlands proud of you.”

“As will you,” he said. “The next opening in the Circle is yours.”

“I hope so.” Her face clouded. “I only hope it won’t be your place I’m taking.”

Alexi knew exactly what she meant but was reluctant to pursue this line of conversation. The Circle comprised thirteen members, one for each province of the Great Kingdom. Alexi would

take the place of Sir Kendall, who had fallen in battle just over a month before. If there was a warrior Alexi had admired as much as he did Kateri Shadowborn, it was Sir Kendall. His death was a loss that the Great Kingdom would long remember.

"I'm too stubborn for that," he said.

Dasmaria rolled her eyes. "I'm surprised you aren't dead already," she said. "Sometimes I wish you would take a few minutes to think before charging into battle."

"And sometimes I wish you'd stop planning strategies into the ground. Occasionally you have to put your faith in steel."

Dasmaria raised her hands in a gesture of truce. They could continue this debate for hours, she insisting that he was reckless and took far too many chances, and he complaining that she took an interminable amount of time to decide upon the perfect strategy for any given encounter. While Dasmaria would never admit it, Alexi felt certain it was this dichotomy that had drawn them to each other as comrades-in-arms. When they combined their talents on the field of battle, few enemies could stand against them.

"I have to go," she said. "The pre-Ascension service starts in a few minutes. But I wanted to see you first, to let you know how proud I am of you."

He reached for her hands. "Thank you," he said. "I'll see you after the ceremony?"

She nodded, then stepped away and retrieved her helmet. As Alexi watched her walk out of the chapel, he imagined their future. With Dasmaria by his side, he could conquer anything—even his nightmares.

In the distance, a bell tolled. It struck eleven times, reminding Alexi that he was but one hour away from becoming a paladin. As the last resonances of those heavy carillons faded toward silence, Alexi knelt once again to complete his final series of prayers.

"May my lord Belenus find his servant Alexi Shadowborn worthy to serve as one of his holy champions..." he began. As he said the words, a shadow crept into his heart.

Nerves, he thought, and began again.

When the sun had nearly reached its zenith, Alexi rose. At the door of the chapel, he paused and took a deep breath. The next hour would define the rest of his life.

He was ready.

Without so much as a backward glance, he strode into the bright sunlight. As he walked across the open courtyard toward the great domed cathedral beyond, he noticed from the corner of his eye a dark shape at one of the cathedral's narrow windows. A second glance revealed nothing unusual about the opening, although he felt certain that only a second before he had seen a dark, hooded figure standing just beyond the sun's rays.

More nerves, Alexi thought.



The Ascension ritual had actually begun at dawn. As the Eye of Belenus first appeared in the sky, the High Mother had begun to pray on Alexi's behalf. One by one, in an order dictated by their position within the church hierarchy, the other sisters who served the cathedral joined her. This was a private time for the sisterhood from which even the paladin candidate was excluded.

Several hours later, other worshipers arrived in the cathedral. Present members of the Circle, knights of the Great Kingdom, nobles of the provinces, and family members of the candidate all gathered to invoke the blessing of Belenus.

With the sun a scant fifteen minutes from its zenith, the two youngest members of the

sisterhood, neither of whom were more than ten years of age, opened the great golden doors of the cathedral. They were dressed in sparkling golden gowns and carried bouquets of yellow and white flowers. On any other occasion, they would have drawn the attention of every eye.

But today did not belong to them.

Alexi stepped into view, his ornamental armor gleaming brightly in the light of the countless candles illuminating the inside of the dark temple. For the first time, he saw the crowd that had come to celebrate his Ascension. The sight fairly took his breath away.

At the far end of the temple, beneath a vast bronze dome, sat the bier upon which Sir Kendall's body lay. He was clad in burnished armor that was even more ornate and brightly polished than Alexi's. Phantom, the great sword that he had wielded in battle, lay atop his body. The blade was broken, a mark of the blow that had ended his life. Kendall's standard, a gleaming golden starburst on a black background, hung behind his body; thirteen lamps, each tinted a different color, hung above the fallen hero. Only twelve of them were lighted.

Just in front of this somber scene stood twelve knights, nine male and three female, in fine armor. Their own distinctive standards hung behind them. These were the surviving paladins of the Circle, the men and women who waited to welcome Alexi into their order. There were no more beloved champions anywhere in the Great Kingdom. Alexi knew each by reputation, although he had met only three of them. The idea that they all gathered here in his honor humbled him.

To the side of the ring of paladins stood Ferran, Alexi's squire. In his arms, he held the folded standard that would soon fly beside those of the other knights.

A great mass of men and women—no fewer than five hundred, all told—filled the pews of the cathedral. These were the most important members of the gentry and nobility, gathered from around the Shadowlands to see one of their own undergo the Rite of Ascension. They wore their finest clothing—silks and satin, fine brocade, plush fur. An untold fortune in gems and jewels sparkled throughout the august company. Even Alexi, who was about to take a vow renouncing worldly goods, was impressed by the display of wealth and elegance laid before him.

As he strode slowly and solemnly forward, Alexi's gaze fell upon his family. They sat at the front of the cathedral, in the presence of Prince Patrick, the king's own representative and heir to the Alabaster Throne of Avonleigh. Lord Vincent stood holding Lady Victoria's hand. Both beamed with pride as their eldest son moved slowly closer. Aurora tugged at her mother's fine silk gown and pointed at Alexi.

Next to the Shadowborn family, Alexi saw Dasmaria. She still wore her ceremonial armor, sans helmet. Always the picture of calm composure and careful dignity at formal occasions, Dasmaria met Alexi's gaze. With only the faintest hint of a smile, she winked at him. The uncharacteristic display so startled Alexi that he wasn't sure he had actually seen it. When he looked at her again, Dasmaria had resumed her normal stoicism.

A few more steps brought Alexi to a point some fifteen feet from Sir Kendall's bier. For a moment, he forgot all about the assembled crowd and the honor he would receive today. He knelt and bowed his head, offering a silent prayer for the memory of the deceased paladin.

As Alexi finished his prayer, a petite door opened at the side of the cathedral dome. A petite shape appeared in the portal and stepped slowly into the light of the candles.

The High Mother had arrived. The moment of Ascension was at hand. Alexi drew in a deep breath.

As the High Mother stepped slowly forward, her ever-present cedar staff in hand, a hush fell over the crowd. Not only was the silence a sign of respect for the person believed to be the very mouth of god, but it was also a function of her presence. Something about this slender woman—an inner radiance—made everything else pale beside her.

As she passed the assembled Knights of the Circle, they dropped to one knee. When her gradual, deliberate steps brought her to a place between Alexi and the body of Sir Kendall, she raised the cedar staff high. All heads bowed in anticipation of the words to come.

"My children," she said in a voice that carried like the reverberations of a hunting horn, "we have assembled here today for the holy Rite of Ascension. Before the Eye of Belenus closes on this day, a new paladin will join the Knights of the Circle. In all the hundred-year history of the Great Kingdom and its matron church, the Ascension has occurred only twenty times. Today, we gather for the twenty-first."

After a pause, she continued. "History will long remember the twenty-first Ascension. Never before have two members of the same family been accepted into the ranks of the most holy Circle. When Alexi Shadowborn swears the oath of Ascension this day, he follows in the footsteps of his mother, Kateri Shadowborn, crusader of the Heretical Wars in the south and tamer of the Sea Raiders in the north. The fifteen years since the Circle lost Kateri Shadowborn have done nothing to erase the memory of that great warrior. To this day, the bards sing of her valor and recite the stories of her adventures.

"But enough of the past," proclaimed the High Mother. "This is a day for looking forward, not backward."

With that, she raised her great staff into the air and spoke a word in the language of the gods. The golden sunburst affixed to the cedar pole flared with magical amber light. Gasps of wonder swept through the crowd at this rare display of magic.

"Alexi Shadowborn," called the High Mother, "step forward."

At the mention of his name, Alexi rose to his feet. As commanded, he walked toward the High Mother, stopping when he stood less than a yard away from her. They exchanged exaggerated, formal bows, and Ferran moved quietly to stand beside his brother.

"Alexi Shadowborn," intoned the High Mother, her commanding voice sending a shiver of anticipation down Alexi's spine. "Why have you come here this day?"

"High Mother," responded Alexi, his mouth dry, "I have come to take my place among the Knights of the Circle."

"It is a great honor that you seek." Despite the fact that her words were part of a standard litany used at every Ascension since the original thirteen knights were sworn in a century ago, her tone was warm. "The Knights of the Circle are the ultimate defenders of the Church of Belenus and the Great Kingdom of Avonleigh. They ride at the head of our armies and undertake the most formidable quests in the land. Do you understand this?"

"I do." Alexi felt the gaze of a thousand eyes upon him, but found that he could not tear his own from the glowing head of the High Mother's staff. The magical aura so captivated him that he could scarcely blink.

"Do you, Alexi Shadowborn, reaffirm your devotion to the radiant Belenus, his most holy church, and all its traditions?"

"I do."

"Do you reaffirm your oath of fealty to the Alabaster Throne, his Royal Majesty King Christopher, and the thirteen provinces of the Great Kingdom?"

"I do."

"And do you, Alexi Shadowborn, accept the duties, responsibilities, and obligations incumbent upon a Knight of the Circle?"

"I do."

"Then hand to me your blade, Alexi Shadowborn, that I may bestow upon you the greatest honor any warrior may strive for in the Great Kingdom."

Alexi drew Corona cleanly from its scabbard. The gleaming steel caught the candlelight and reflected it back onto the walls of the cathedral. Holding the blade flat across his hands, he presented it to the High Mother.

The High Mother allowed a smile to touch the edges of her mouth. Perhaps she recognized the sword, but Alexi could not say. She grasped the pommel, not seeming to notice the weight of the weapon in her thin, frail hands.

She nodded, and Alexi lowered himself to one knee. He bowed his head, his heart hammering. He waited anxiously for the touch of steel on his shoulder and the words of Ascension.

“Let the Eye of Belenus look upon us!” cried the High Mother. At her magical command, the top of the great dome folded outward, opening itself like a bronze blossom. A gust of wind swept through the cathedral, extinguishing the thousands of flickering candles.

At that moment, a shaft of sunlight should have fallen on Alexi, the High Mother, and the body of Sir Kendall. Beyond the now-open dome should have been a crisp blue sky and the blazing eye of Belenus himself.

Instead, there was only darkness.

For a second, panic gripped Alexi. As gasps of fear and cries of alarm ran through the crowd, the warrior remembered his dream. He remembered throwing open the shutters of his bedroom window and seeing only the fluid darkness that lay beyond. Was he dreaming even now?

But then he saw the truth. The Eye of Belenus was still visible in the sky, but only as a glowing ring around a black orb. In the middle of the day, cursed darkness ruled the land.

Alexi wanted to cry out. Fear, anger, rage, and despair all fought for control of his heart. When Belenus closed his eye, it was a sign of his greatest displeasure.

The High Mother, perhaps more surprised even than Alexi, nonetheless reacted quickly. She dropped the sword as if her hand had been burned by it and lifted her staff over her head with two gnarled arms. Corona clattered onto the stone floor, ringing like a blacksmith’s hammer, then lay still and silent. As the High Mother spoke another word of command in the holy tongue, the fiery glow atop her staff brightened and spread its illumination throughout the cathedral.

The effect calmed the crowd somewhat, but the darkness outside threatened to flood them with panic. To be sure, these were educated men and women. They were nobles and scholars, not commoners or peasants. In their own way, however, they were as superstitious as the serfs who toiled in the fields.

Apparently sensing that more effort on her part was needed, the High Mother began to chant. As she sang words of prayer and benediction, the members of the audience gradually joined in. As their voices grew, the panic and fear slowly receded. Amid this sudden darkness, the entire assemblage pleaded with their god for mercy and begged for his forgiveness. They knew that he was angry with them and prayed that the High Mother would see them through this time of fear and terror.

Alexi, for all his piety and devotion, did not join in these songs of worship. As soon as the darkness filled the cathedral, despair greater than he had ever known gripped his spirit. He closed his eyes, trying to deny the reality of the moment.

Tears formed and trickled slowly down his face. His throat tightened, making breathing difficult and speech impossible. Although he could hear the chanted prayers of his countrymen, he could not join them.

The young knight knew that the Darkening was an omen of the most terrible significance. Its occurrence at this particular moment could signify only one thing: Belenus had found him unworthy.

Why? Have I done something to incur your displeasure, my god? Alexi searched his memory. Finding no answer, he searched his heart. Is it my faith? Do you doubt my devotion?

His prayers received no response. Belenus had forsaken him. An emptiness more black and vast than the darkness covering the earth eclipsed Alexi's spirit.

In time, the prayers and songs of the people did their work. The Eye of Belenus began to open again, returning his gift of warmth and light to the terrified world below. An almost visible burden was lifted from the masses assembled for the Ascension of Alexi Shadowborn.

The anguished knight opened his eyes to see the light of Belenus returning. The radiance of the High Mother's staff poured across the gathered people, giving them hope and bolstering their faith. Where the light fell upon Alexi, however, it seemed pale and weak. He took no consolation in the blazing holy relic.

Alexi realized that he had fallen forward in supplication. When the Darkening began, he had been kneeling before the High Mother. Now, as it passed, he was leaning forward on both knees supporting himself with his outstretched hands. He started to rise back to his feet, but then saw a flash of silver on the cold stone before him.

There, where the High Mother had dropped it, rested the gleaming Corona. A shaft of light falling upon it from the magical staff reflected brightly upon the blade. So true was the reflection that Alexi almost believed that the sword itself sparkled with sunfire.

Was it not enough to own such a blade, even if he were not a member of the Circle? He tried to take solace in this thought, but it offered only fleeting consolation. Corona, glorious as it was, meant nothing in comparison to a place among the Knights of the Circle.

And perhaps he would have neither. It was said that the magical Corona could not be held by an unworthy knight. There were even tales in which the crusading Kateri Shadowborn had defeated enemies who had managed to snatch Corona from her hand, only to drop it when the pain and smell of searing flesh had proven too great for them.

Were these stories true? Alexi didn't know. If they were, it seemed likely that his own hands would now find the weapon excruciatingly hot to the touch.

Putting aside his fear and doubt, he reached out a hand toward the pommel. There was no trepidation in his manner. Either he would hold the sword or he would not.

To his relief, nothing happened. Indeed, the act of reclaiming his weapon seemed to draw him back from the abyss of despair. The touch of steel, surprisingly cool in his hand, restored some of his lost confidence. Here was hope, if nothing else, that all was not lost.

As he slid Corona back into its scabbard, Alexi drew in a deep breath. He rose and lifted his eyes to the High Mother.

Her prayers for solace and absolution ended, she brought the brass-tipped base of the cedar staff down and struck it loudly on the floor. The radiance atop it dimmed but did not fail. The Eye of Belenus was fully open again, although Alexi scarcely felt its warmth.

The High Mother looked him sharply in the eye. Her ancient gaze burned with fire, and the warrior knew that he could not have looked away even if he had wanted to. Alexi sensed that she was taking his measure. Coolly and calmly, she assessed him as a jeweler might a precious stone. All his virtues would be clear to her, he knew, and no fault undiscovered.

"Alexi Shadowborn," she said at last, "you have been found wanting."

Alexi bowed his head. He focused his gaze on one stone of the hard floor, bracing himself.

"Belenus has closed his eye to you," she pronounced. "I call upon you to renounce your petition to the station of paladin and privileges of the Circle."

Alexi tried to speak, but his throat seemed to collapse. He closed his eyes, summoned all the courage and energy he could muster, and forced out the words he knew he must say.

"I... renounce my petition."

For a moment, Alexi felt nothing. It seemed as if his spirit had been drawn out of his body. All

the life, all the emotion, all the hope was lost. Only a shell remained.

“The holy scripture tells us to judge no man for deeds we do not know,” said the High Mother. “Never has word reached me of any misdeed or act of impiety on your part. I sense a taint upon your spirit, knight, but I see no evil. What has stained your heart so, I cannot imagine.

“Go in peace, Alexi Shadowborn. Return to your home, but take care that the darkness within you does not grow. Evil is a seductive thing, and it seldom releases even the most tenuous of handholds.”

Alexi turned as crisply as he could, trying to maintain a dignified bearing. He could feel the eyes of his countrymen upon him as he strode steadily back toward the cathedral entrance. He focused his gaze straight ahead, unable to meet even his parents’ eyes.

Whispered questions drifted to his ears. What evil could the warrior have committed? What dark secrets did he harbor? He struggled to ignore their speculation. The citizens of Avonleigh would create their own answers soon enough. He would be judged guilty by the people whose lives he had sworn to defend.

Ferran appeared at his side. He said nothing, but quickly matched his stride to that of his older brother. Alexi could see tears running down Ferran’s cheeks and burned with shame at having been disgraced in the eyes of the youth.

As the cathedral doors swung closed behind him, Alexi heard a sound that chilled him to the marrow. From deep within the temple came a powerful female voice. Tones that mixed youth and vitality with maturity and wisdom reached out to destroy what might be left of his spirit.

“Dasmara Eveningstar,” called the High Mother, “step forward. As the next in line for Ascension, the honor of paladinhood falls upon you.”



Alexi wanted nothing more than to get as far away from the cathedral as he could.

Before he had taken a dozen steps, he emitted a high, sharp whistle. In prompt response, a sleek black warhorse sprang forward. As Alexi mounted Pitch, he heard Ferran whistle for his own destrier, a blue roan named Midnight.

Alexi rode at a wild gallop, as if the wind rushing through his hair could cleanse his spirit of the taint that sullied it. Halfway to Shadowfast, however, he realized that driving his stallion until it dropped would not ease his despair. Relieving the proud steed of its disgraced rider, he dismounted and walked beside the animal.

The light wind of the morning had cooled and stiffened. Thick, bulbous clouds formed and rose into the sky. They looked ominous and foreboding to Alexi, as if they frowned upon the fallen paladin. So unworthy was he that the Eye of Belenus would not even see him home.

As he plodded toward Shadowfast, Alexi heard a rapid series of detonations in the distance. At first, the warrior thought it was the rumbling thunder of the coming storm. Then, however, he realized the truth: He heard the echoing reports of fireworks bursting above the cathedral. The Ascension was complete. The Circle had been forged anew, with Dasmaria in his place.

A bitter, staccato rain began to fall upon the knight, hammering his armor and stinging his flesh. In no time at all, Alexi felt as miserable on the outside as he did in his heart.

Questions of Why? and How? tumbled through his thoughts, but he had no more answers now than he did while standing before the High Mother. He knew only that he had been judged undeserving by his god.

Not until Ferran twisted his foot on a rock and crashed to the ground did Alexi snap back to the present. Since leaving the Ascension ceremony—Dasmaria's Ascension ceremony—he had paid no attention to his brother. Indeed, he had forgotten his squire followed faithfully behind him.

His heart now even heavier with remorse, Alexi ran to where Ferran had fallen and dropped to one knee beside him. The ankle was already swollen and discolored. Ferran's face flushed and contorted in pain. "I think it's sprained," he gasped.

"Worse," said Alexi calmly. "It's broken. Looks like you've gotten your share of my luck today."

"That's—ouch!—a squire's job," Ferran said as Alexi examined the injury more closely.

Midnight moved nearer to look down upon his prone master. He leaned forward and put his long, dark nose against Ferran's. The squire reached up to push the curious horse back, but not before Midnight showed his concern with a quick lick along the youth's cheek.

"Pah!" cried Ferran, "Get back, you stupid horse! hate it when you do that! Who taught you that, anyway?"

Alexi smiled in spite of himself. "Aurora's turning your war-horse into a trick pony," he said, offering a silent word of thanks for the little imp's lessons. If anything could keep his younger brother's mind off his injury, it was a few drippy horse kisses. "I'm going to have to lift you into the saddle. I'll try to be careful, but it won't be pleasant."

Ferran nodded but said nothing. Alexi knew that the young squire had a high tolerance for pain, but that fact didn't make the prospect of moving him any better. Still, there was nothing else to do. Alexi leaned forward. He slid one arm under Ferran's knees and looped the other past the small of his back.

"Don't move him," came a distant voice. It was weak and dry, speaking at once of age and

infirmity. For all its frailty, however, something in its timbre commanded respect. Alexi paused, turning his head toward the speaker.

Perhaps twelve yards down the road stood a robed figure. Alexi estimated his height at no more than five and a half feet, but couldn't begin to guess his weight. Although the stranger was completely covered in crimson robes, they seemed to hang so loosely that Alexi almost wondered if anyone truly hid within them. From his vantage point, kneeling beside the injured Ferran, Alexi's gaze fell beneath the traveler's overhanging cowl. He expected to see the wrinkled face of an elderly pilgrim. Instead, he saw only darkness and the faint sparkle of keen eyes.

"Who are you?" asked Alexi. He doubted the traveler posed a threat. Even if the frail figure proved to be a spellcaster, Alexi believed he could reach his sword before any magic could be woven against him.

"I am a stranger to these lands," responded the quietly assured voice. "I am Lysander Greylocks, a servant of Brigit."

Alexi made a holy sign of respect at the mention of the moon goddess. Ferran did the same. While they had both sworn fealty to Belenus, the fiery master of the day, they respected his nocturnal counterpart and her haunting powers.

"Perhaps I can be of assistance to you," said the pilgrim, moving forward. The quickness of his gait caused Alexi to consider whether he had misjudged the stranger's vitality.

As the red-robed figure neared Pitch, the horse snorted, the sort of sound that Alexi associated with danger. Midnight also nickered his disapproval.

Alexi tensed, a disturbing thought entering his mind. How had the unexpected visitor drawn so close without the horses raising an alarm earlier? Pitch was one of the most highly trained war-horses in the Shadowlands, and Midnight was not far behind. Individually, either of them should have detected the approaching stranger. And yet the pilgrim had appeared before them as if from thin air.

The horses' concern for their wounded companion had probably distracted them. Not sensing any danger himself, Alexi allowed Lysander to kneel beside Ferran.

Lysander extended slender hands toward Ferran's unnaturally twisted ankle. What Alexi thought at first was deathly pale skin proved to be white satin gloves. Even through these, however, the bones of the old man's knuckles showed plainly. If the pilgrim was not already trouble by arthritis, Alexi felt certain that it would not be long before his hands began to ache.

Ferran's nervous gaze locked on Lysander's trembling fingers. If Alexi had learned anything about battlefield medicine, it was never to let a wounded man watch a healer tend to his injuries.

He called Ferran's name and lowered himself to the wet grass opposite Lysander. With his field plate on, the effort was not easy. "Little brother," Alexi said casually, forcing a light mood, "I've been meaning to ask you something."

"What?" asked Ferran, obviously a little confused by his brother's sudden desire for conversation. That was fine with Alexi—anything that kept Ferran from watching the delicate passes Lysander was making over the broken ankle.

"When are you going to announce your intentions?"

"My intentions?"

"About Dasmara's squire—what's her name again?"

Ferran glared. "You know full well what her name is."

"Shandra, right?"

"Right," said Ferran, his attention now fully on his brother. "But what makes you think that I have 'intentions' to announce?"

Alexi smiled at the blush in his brother's cheeks. It appeared that Ferran was old enough to

handle a sword and a bow, but the mysteries of the fairer sex would remain elusive for a few more years.

While Ferran was distracted, Lysander closed his eyes in concentration. Alexi watched from the corner of his eye as the old man prayed silently. He remembered his own experiences with practitioners of the healing arts. The pilgrim placed his hands on either side of the injury, pouring healing energy into the limb. Alexi imagined the warmth he knew would spread from those ancient fingers into the damaged tissues. Even as he watched, the bones began to knit. A minute later, as the wandering priest ended his entreaty to the moon goddess, Ferran's ankle was completely healed. Although the skin would remain discolored for a day or two, he had freed the squire from most of the injury's burden.

At that moment, Ferran's voice grabbed Alexi's attention. He realized that his mind had wandered.

"What was that?" Alexi asked.

"I said, 'When are you going to announce your intentions about Dasmaria?' "

A warm sensation crept up Alexi's neck and into his face. He had left himself wide open for that riposte. Could everyone see his feelings for Dasmaria?

His thoughts turned dark again. What chance did he have of winning—or retaining—the love of a woman who had witnessed his ultimate disgrace? Dasmaria was now a paladin. What use could she possibly have for someone whose failure had been proclaimed by Belenus himself?

"There's nothing to tell," he said brusquely.

A great clap of thunder ripped across the countryside, bringing rain pounding down upon the trio. Alexi rose to his feet, no small effort in his heavy shell of armor. Once he was standing again, he offered a hand to Ferran and pulled his younger brother to a standing position.

As Ferran tested his still-delicate ankle, Alexi turned to Lysander. "We are in your debt," he said formally. "If there is anything that—"

"I was at the Ascension ceremony," interrupted the stranger. His voice held neither judgment nor pity, but Alexi bristled at the statement.

"Then your help is even more appreciated," Alexi said. He knew that once word of his shame spread throughout the Great Kingdom, any act of kindness would be more than he could expect.

"Do not judge yourself too harshly," said the pilgrim. He folded his arms across his chest and tilted his cowed head to one side. Clearly he was taking Alexi's measure, just as the High Mother had done.

"I fail to see how this is any of your concern," said Ferran. Alexi motioned for his squire to be silent. While he appreciated his brother's support, he wanted to deal with the pilgrim himself.

"Perhaps it is not," said the monk with a shrug, "but I have been watching you for some time, Alexi Shadowborn. I have seen nothing that causes me to believe you unworthy of the honor denied you this day."

Alexi tensed. "Watching me? Why?"

" 'Tis not important now," said Lysander with a wave of dismissal. His robes grew heavy with rainwater. "What matters is that you now watch yourself closely."

Alexi shook his head. "I don't understand."

"You will, in time. Look within yourself, Alexi Shadowborn. Look into your heart, and look into your dreams. There you shall find the answers you seek."

A chill that had nothing to do with the cold rain ran up Alexi's spine. Something in the old man's words told Alexi that he knew of the knight's dreadful nocturnal visions. Alexi had never mentioned them to Ferran, his family, or even Dasmaria. Lysander had already admitted to watching Alexi. For how long? How many other secrets did this strange visitor know about him?

A sound off to his side caught Alexi's attention. Ferran stood not far away, listening to every word. He caught his younger brother's concerned gaze and decided he had heard enough of the pilgrim's cryptic musings. He turned around to demand some answers.

Lysander Greylocks was gone. And again the horses had been silent.

"Where—where did he go?" asked Ferran, moving with only a slight limp to stand beside Alexi.

"I don't know," said the warrior in a hushed voice. "But I think it's best to get you home. We can worry about the old man later."

As they rode, heaviness settled over Alexi's spirit again. Lysander's mysterious words and the High Mother's grave pronouncement echoed in his mind, leaving him as bewildered as ever. Mercifully, Ferran remained silent.

The rain continued to fall. By the time they reached the gates of Shadowfast, the shower had become a veritable gale. Fierce winds drove a torrent of water sideways into their faces. Lightning cracked the sky with traces of actinic blue, followed almost instantly by the cannon fire of thunder.

Alexi turned the care of his mount over to the grooms and pushed through the front gates. No other servants came forward to welcome him. Instead of the usual chatter and activity of the manor, the only sounds Alexi heard were the lonely echoes of his own footfalls. That suited him just fine. He wanted to be left alone.

He strode past paintings, statues, and tapestries that told the story of a family that, until today, had never known disgrace. When he reached his bedchamber, he bolted the heavy oak door behind him.

It took him half an hour to get out of his field plate without Ferran's help. Though he had no interest in drying and oiling the rain-slicked pile of metal, he was too disciplined a warrior to neglect the care of his armor. Surprisingly, the mindless physical labor helped soothe his raw emotions, though it could not keep dark thoughts at bay.

When he had completed the task, he looped his sword belt over the post at the head of his bed and went to sit next to the window. As the storm tried to smash its way through the glass, he again considered Lysander Greylocks's words. Was the pilgrim a gifted soothsayer or just a spooky old man?

Look into your heart, he had said. But Alexi's heart was pure. Wasn't it? His prayers in the chapel this morning had been earnest. The shadow that had passed through him at their completion had been nerves. Only nerves. Or perhaps a flash of prescience at what was about to transpire—nothing more.

Look into your dreams, Lysander had counseled as well. With a shudder, Alexi recalled the portentous nightmare he'd awoken to this morning. What ill omens would his dreams hold tonight?



A powerful booming jolted Alexi awake.

He looked around in drowsy confusion as the fading echoes of the distant concussions fell upon his ears. His disorientation overshadowed any curiosity about the noise that had wakened him.

He apparently lay in his bedroom, yet it seemed unfamiliar to him. The furniture appeared changed, the decor of the room different. On the wall where he had displayed the mace of an ogre he once defeated now hung the helmet of an eastern warrior. In the corner where he kept the delicate, ornate crossbow he had received for his thirteenth birthday now rested a gleaming glass sphere atop a cold silver tripod.

Warily taking stock of the inconsistencies, he noticed with relief that at least one item rested where it should. His sword belt remained hooked over the bedpost, right where he had hung it. Whatever else had changed, Corona was near at hand.

A strange mist hung about the room. The tenuous white haze drifted as if carried on subtle currents in the perfectly still air of the room, clinging to the objects it touched. The mist, whose origin Alexi could not determine, stifled Alexi's vision, draining away colors to leave everything pale and muted. The curtains, his blankets, the rugs on the hardwood floor, all were bleached to a lifeless gray. Looking at his own hands, he saw that the same was true of them. His flesh now had the white look of a man whose long-dead body had been bleached white from the sea.

Only when his mind adjusted to the filter of the mist did Alexi realize he had gotten out of his bed. He didn't remember rising, but he must have, for he now stood near the window. His eyes opened wide as he noticed a lithe woman stretched out in his bed.

The mists hampered recognition. At first Alexi took the figure to be his mother, Victoria Shadowborn. As the vapors parted slightly, however, he saw that he was mistaken.

To be sure, the woman resembled Lady Shadowborn. She was tall and angular, with elegant features. This woman was more athletic than the former archer, though, and showed the well-defined muscles of someone who had known melee combat.

Still, there was something familiar about her. With a gasp, Alexi realized that he had been both right and wrong.

The woman in the bed was not Victoria Shadowborn, the woman who had raised him from infancy. She was Kateri Shadowborn, the woman who had given birth to him.

That explained both the warrior's build and the resemblance to his adoptive mother. Alexi remembered seeing his real mother only in paintings and sketches. The face before him could certainly be the same oil-and-charcoal beauty he had admired so many times.

The booming returned, sending shivers through the mists. Alexi leapt at the sudden noise, his hand going to the place on his hip where his sword usually rested. His fingers touched only empty air, however, and he remembered that the blade hung on the other side of the room.

The woman on the bed sat upright with the speed of an arrow in flight. Her hand moved so fast that Alexi barely saw it grab Corona's handle. He marveled at this woman's reflexes. Could he ever be her equal?

Kateri climbed out of bed and stepped soundlessly onto the mist-shrouded floor. With a sharp twist, she slipped the silver sword from its scabbard. A brief pulse of white light sprang from the blade as it tasted air. The flash reminded Alexi of sunlight hitting silvered glass.

Kateri moved to the bedroom door, snatching up a robe as she did so, and transferred the sword to her left hand. As she deftly looped the sash into a knot with her right hand, she spoke

two words in the ancient, holy tongue of the church.

“Karnas, radamar.”

Alexi knew the first word; it was the name “Corona” in the holy tongue. The second word, however, was one seldom spoken outside of holy services. It was the name given to the rays of sunlight that were said to beam from the eyes of Belenus himself. Holy and pure, it was said to be one of the elemental forces of the universe.

No sooner had Kateri Shadowborn spoken than the sword glowed with light. Even the smothering mists could not obstruct the vibrant golden rays it emitted. Amid the empty shades of gray, recesses of pure black, and drifting white vapors, it was a single sliver of sunlight, warm and reassuring.

Kateri swept out of the room, her way lit by the glow of Corona. Alexi followed, his mouth dry with awe and wonder. His mother approached the top of the stairs and descended them smoothly.

A wave of foreboding washed over him, although he could not say whether it came from the strange mists or something more substantial. He wanted to call out, to let his mother know he was with her. But some power made speech impossible.

As the beautiful warrior reached the bottom of the stairway, another volley of booms filled the air. They echoed hollowly, perhaps distorted by the mists, but this time Alexi recognized the sound. Someone was pounding on the door to the manor, lifting and releasing a great knocker that hung on the other side.

Something about the scene troubled Alexi. He couldn’t define the cause, but the same sense had warned him of many an ambush. He tried to shake off the feeling, attributing it to the strangeness of this place. Then he noticed that Kateri seemed unsettled as well.

Kateri came to a stop beside the door and turned up the wick on a lantern. A wane, yellow light tried and failed to illuminate the area. It spread outward but was smothered by the mists, becoming nothing more than an area of lighter gray. Contrasted with the fierce glow of the magical blade, the lantern was impotent against the darkness.

As Kateri reached to open the door, she made no motion to sheathe her sword. Indeed, she spoke to it again.

“Karnas, ramorte.”

Instantly the glow died, extinguished by a holy word used to observe the setting of the sun. To look at the weapon now, no one would suspect the sword was any different than one carried by the common constabulary.

Kateri opened the door. The faint shaft of gray lantern light revealed a dark figure. He wore black robes and hid his face beneath a great hood. In his hand, the visitor held an ornate long sword. Alexi squinted, trying to get a better view of the stranger, but the effort proved futile. Everything about the visitor seemed black: his robes, the sword he carried, and the long shadow that stretched out behind him to fuse with the darkness beyond.

Kateri seemed to relax slightly. Her face held recognition, but anxiety as well. She stepped back from the door.

“What brings you here at this hour?” Her tone suggested that she greeted a friend. Perhaps Alexi had mistaken her feelings. After all, Kateri had been asleep when her visitor came calling. Perhaps she was merely weary, not wary.

“It could not be helped,” came the thin response. So soft were the words of the dark-robed figure that Alexi barely heard them. Indeed, he seemed to know what the man had said without actually hearing him speak.

“We found this weapon in the ancient catacombs beneath Forenoon Abbey,” the visitor continued. “When none of the brothers could identify it or read the inscription, the abbot

directed me to bring it here. Surely the wisdom of the great Kateri Shadowborn can unravel the mysteries that confound us.”

Kateri tilted her head to the side and regarded the black weapon with a curious eye. Alexi noted that the runes on the sword seemed even darker than the mysterious metal into which they had been inscribed. They were visible only because of their apparent invisibility. It was as if patches of nothingness were set into the midnight black blade. Try as he might, he could not focus his eyes on the letters.

Suddenly fire burst from the monk’s blade.

A scintillating orange blaze sheathed the black weapon. The effect resembled the eclipse that had stripped Alexi of paladinhood. The monk raised the sword high, throwing a rippling pattern of black shadows across the misty entrance hall. Like the radiance of Corona, the glow pushed back the muting vapors.

Alexi knew in his gut that the monk’s weapon was every bit as evil as his mother’s blade was holy.

Kateri cried out in surprise. She stepped back, her eyes wide with wonder. This was a moment of betrayal. His mother had greeted an ally, but now faced a deadly assassin.

The monk brought his blade down, trailing curls of hellfire behind it. Alexi tried to rush forward but could not move. Just as something had compelled him to follow his mother earlier, now an invisible ward constrained him from aiding her. The knight tried to shout a warning, but no sound escaped his paralyzed throat.

Nonetheless, the sudden blow did not catch Kateri off guard. When the blazing blade fell, it cut only air. The trained warrior had fallen away from the stroke, dropped to the floor, and rolled smartly to the side. Completing its arc, the fiery metal bit deep into the entrance hall rug and threw out a shower of glowing embers.

By the time her attacker recovered from his errant blow, Kateri had kicked herself back to her feet. She brought up her own gleaming blade and whispered “*Karnas, radamar*” again. The silver sword unleashed a blinding glow. Beams of pure sunlight lanced through the mists, driving them back and battling the smoldering fire of the black blade.

The spectacle of dueling lights paled in comparison to the effect of Corona’s radiance upon the monk. Wherever one of the amber shafts fell on the dark intruder, smoke roiled up and flame erupted. A shriek of agony tore through the air, but the blows did not slow the attacker. Howling in rage, he pointed the tip of his ebon blade at Kateri. The monk spoke a command in a language Alexi did not know, but which somehow offended his ears all the same.

With the utterance of that vulgar sound, a searing bolt of fire drove outward from the weapon. It splashed across the paladin, causing her to topple back and cry out in agony. The gleaming Corona fell from her hand as Kateri crashed to the floor. It struck the floor and fell dark.

As flames danced upon her robe, the smell of burning flesh and hair filled the room. Defiance burned in Kateri’s eyes even as pain contorted her features. The sinister monk strode forward, raised high his weapon, and brought it down in a final deadly stroke.

Alexi and Kateri Shadowborn cried out as one.



The coming dawn threw a blanket of thick, gray light across the whole of the Shadowlands. Yesterday's storm had passed, leaving swollen streams, swampy puddles, and muddy roads in its wake. Dark green leaves hung limply from the trees, and tortured branches drooped weakly after brutal winds had torn at them all night long.

Alexi rose before anyone else, even the servants. He quickly donned a cotton shirt and buckskin pants, and slipped out of Shadowfast into the slick predawn air. He had no desire to meet his parents, siblings, or any of the household staff. In time, he would come to terms with the events of the last twenty-four hours and be able to face others again. Until then, however, he wanted no contact with anyone.

Beyond his shame at the Darkening, last night's dream left him in a troubled mood. He had often wondered about the exact circumstances of his mother's death, but heretofore he believed it had occurred in honorable battle. To see her die by a traitor's foul sword awakened feelings he never realized he had toward the mother he had never known.

The vision, combined with Lysander's cryptic words, had inspired this early morning trek. If his dreams indeed held the answers he sought, he knew where he must go to piece together the clues.

After traveling some distance down the hard-packed road that linked Shadowfast with the rest of the Shadowlands, Alexi came upon a trio of men. They were clad in the clothing of commoners, out and about on some early morning business. As he drew near, he saw that they were fishermen headed for the docks. No doubt they were eager to take advantage of the bountiful fishing that so often came with the dawn that followed a storm.

Their laughter and conversation vanished the instant Alexi came into sight. While none of them dared show any disrespect to a knight, they had obviously heard that Alexi Shadowborn was the cause of the Darkening. They had come upon the man whose deeds made even the radiant Belenus look away.

Alexi knew he would have to grow accustomed to such responses. Much time would have to pass before folk could look at him without thinking of the darkness that had fallen over their land. Words like "impure" and "unholy" would be forever linked to the name Alexi Shadowborn.

The fishermen lowered their eyes and made the appropriate signs of respect to a noble. Alexi greeted them in kind. As he passed the trio he heard, or believed that he heard, their whispered comments. Fear tinged their voices.

He turned off the path and into the forest. Rain-soaked trees showered him as he broke through the scrub bordering the road. Shaking off the chilling drizzle, he emerged into the dark of the wood. With the sun just sneaking over the horizon, the depths of the forest were still obscured with night.

At first Alexi pressed forward despite the poor visibility. After several yards, however, his foot caught on an unseen curl of a root and he toppled forward. A layer of leaves and loam broke his fall.

He got to his feet, brushed the clinging forest floor from his clothes, and sighed. It was too dark to continue. Even after giving his eyes a few minutes to adjust to the dim light, he realized it wouldn't be safe to travel for some time.

He mentally berated himself for forgetting to bring a light. Of course, the glow of the coming dawn had enabled him to see his way easily when he left the house, but it could not penetrate

this shroud of trees. He ran a hand through his hair but stopped in midpass. Maybe he hadn't forgotten a light after all.

The elegant scrape of steel sliding free of a scabbard sounded crisply in the stillness of the dark wood. Alexi considered the blade carefully, noting that it looked unnaturally bright in these gloomy surroundings. He swallowed nervously, as if about to attempt a dangerous feat.

"Corona, radiance," he whispered.

Nothing happened.

A moment elapsed before the fullness of his disappointment registered. He knew that the images he had seen in the night were nothing more than dreams, but he had hoped for something more. He had hoped Corona would respond to his words as it had to Kateri Shadowborn's.

He closed his eyes, seeing again his mother as she spoke to the blade. And he remembered that she hadn't used the common language of the Great Kingdom but the sacred tongue of the mother church. He opened his eyes. Holding the sword at arm's length, blade high, he spoke again.

"Karnas, radamar!"

At once the blade flashed to life. Brilliant light poured out to illuminate the area as brightly as if Belenus had focused his gaze on this place and this place alone. Warmth and well-being coursed through Alexi's body, driving back the despair still haunting his heart. The purity of Corona's light made him feel as if he held a sliver of the sun itself in his hand.

He stared, enraptured, at the shining blade for several moments before his awe faded enough to return him to the present. He could still scarcely believe he held the very sword that Kateri Shadowborn had wielded during her crusades in the Heretical Wars, let alone that the legendary weapon indeed held great magic.

Such artifacts were not unheard of, to be sure. The magic of the High Mother's staff was widely known even before she had displayed its power during the Darkening to calm the masses. Alexi felt despair rise again at the memory, but forced his thoughts back to the radiant Corona. He had never dared hope to possess such a wonder.

With the light of Corona to guide him, Alexi had but a ten-minute walk to reach his destination. Now easily able to skirt roots and other hazards, he struck a quick pace.

As he stepped through the bushes that formed the edge of a wide clearing, the true glow of Belenus fell upon him. In its brightness, the light from Corona's blade seemed to dim, but he no longer needed the magical radiance to see. His mind flashed back to the dream, and he spoke again in the sacred tongue.

"Karnas, ramorte," he commanded. The glow faded. Once more the blade now looked like a common, if finely crafted, sword. He slipped the weapon into its scabbard.

With Corona resting on his hip, Alexi's attention returned to the objective of his chill, damp morning walk. Upon waking from his unrestful sleep, he had speculated that his dream might have been more than a simple nightmare. In ancient tales of the faith, those called upon to serve Belenus often received their instructions through nocturnal visions.

He scarcely dared believe that the very god who had forsaken him by day should whisper in his ear at night. He prayed Belenus would forgive his presumption. But Corona's light had fueled his hopes that his had been no mere dream. How else could he explain the fact that Kateri Shadowborn's magical words had proven efficacious, if the dream had not been sent by the merciful sun lord himself?

Alexi stopped short. Might some sinister power be toying with him? Taking advantage of his despair and shame? It seemed a distinct possibility. He dared not give the matter serious consideration, for even thoughts about the dark gods were both blasphemous and dangerous.

He stepped across a puddle and onto the first of five marble steps rising before his family's

mausoleum. He moved nimbly up them and stopped before a heavy steel grate set into thick granite walls. The smooth stone glistened in the morning light as it hung on to the cold of the night and sheathed itself in a layer of dew. Here and there, where a bit of condensation became too heavy to hold itself up, a tiny stream rolled down the side of the great structure. Sunlight followed the trickle carefully, making it sparkle until it vanished into a seam or onto the ground around the tomb.

Alexi slipped his hand under his shirt and withdrew a leather cord from around his neck. A heavy iron key dangled from it. Like the great lock on the metal door, it bore the radiant solar disk of the Shadowborn family. Alexi slipped the key into the lock, giving it a sharp turn. The mechanism ground into action with a scrape, followed by a sharp report.

The door rolled open easily before him, spilling sunlight into this final resting place. As Alexi entered, the cold air of the sepulcher set upon him.

He experienced a sense of homecoming. Much time had passed since he last communed with the spirits of his family, but in his youth he used to spend countless hours here. Indeed, the grass outside still showed earth where he had worn it away practicing the basic movements of swordplay. Hour after hour he had drilled and rehearsed here, hoping to gain favor with those who had come before and, with a little luck, draw inspiration from the store of wisdom and valor interred in this stone fastness.

In recent years, however, Alexi had been unable to visit the crypt very often. When he became a knight, his role as a protector of the Shadowlands had called him away for long periods. Still, whenever he returned from his campaigns, he always found his way to this quiet shrine.

He wandered between the rows of vaults. Before passing each tomb, he stopped and whispered a prayer for the soul of the departed resting within it. When he first visited the crypt as a boy, he had depended upon the epitaphs decorating each headstone to tell him about the person inside. As the years passed, however, he had carefully studied the lives of all who slept in this place. Now he knew each one by heart.

Some of those who had gone before him Alexi revered above the others. Since the dawn of the Great Kingdom, when the Thirteen Provinces united under the banner of Belenus and his most holy church, a dozen members of the Shadowborn family had chosen to devote their lives to the faith.

All but one of them became members of the clergy. No fewer than three Shadowborns had held the title of bishop, entrusted with keeping the faith throughout the whole of the Shadowlands. One, the most revered Cassandra Shadowborn, had even risen to become the High Mother. Although she died shortly after assuming that blessed office, her time upon the Radiant Throne was marked by fairness and a resurgence of faith among the common folk.

Other ancestors had taken up arms and become knights. Justin and Catherine Shadowborn were two such noble warriors. They had spent their lives fighting for justice and the glory of the great kingdom.

And then there was his mother, Kateri Shadowborn, who had taken up both the mantle of faith and the arms of a warrior. As a paladin, she had devoted her life to serving Belenus and battling evil in all its many forms.

It was her tomb he sought today. When he reached it, he saw in his mind the face of the woman from his dream. He saw her youthful features, her golden hair, her agile form. How difficult to imagine that the vibrant paladin he had seen last night lay still and cold in the stone chamber before him.

He fell to one knee and bent his head low. "I come to seek your guidance, Mother," he said, trying to put into words the heaviness within his heart. "Belenus has closed his eye to me. He will not accept me into his Circle."

He swallowed in a futile attempt to clear the strange tightness from his throat. "I don't know how I offended him, Mother. And I don't know how to serve him, if not as one of his holy paladins."

"The dead seldom respond, I'm afraid."

With a start, Alexi whirled around.

Behind him stood Lysander Greylocks. Alexi hadn't even heard the pilgrim's entrance.

"I thought I was alone," Alexi said, his ire rising at the old man's intrusion into a very private and painful moment. Alexi had been too ashamed to face his own kin after the Darkening, yet here he was, forced to confront a stranger who knew his darkest shame. "What are you doing here? Watching me still?"

"In a manner of speaking."

Alexi rose, towering above the stooped figure. "Why? Does my fall from grace amuse you?"

"Not in the least." With a sigh, Lysander shuffled to a stone bench in the center of the mausoleum. He sat down, gathering the endless folds of his red robe around him. "You have not fallen so very far, Alexi Shadowborn. Recall that 'No man is so pure that he throws not a shadow when Belenus gazes upon him.' "

"A priest of Brigit quotes the *Libram of Belenus*?"

"I have spent much time among followers of Belenus," the pilgrim said.

"Spying on them, too?" Alexi bit back further sarcasm. He tried to peer beneath the cowl that still obscured the old man's face. "Who are you, really, Lysander Greylocks? And what do you want with me?"

The monk held up a staying hand. "One question at a time, Alexi Shadowborn." He let his hand drop back to his lap. "I am, as I told you yesterday, a servant of Brigit and her church. Though I once came from the Southern Empire, I have long lived among the people of the Great Kingdom. Most cannot discern my accent anymore."

Alexi narrowed his eyes. The Southern Empire—a land of swarthy folk who worshiped strange gods—was the enemy who had battled the Great Kingdom in the Heretical Wars. "How came a heretic to worship the true gods?"

"I met Kateri Shadowborn."

Alexi gasped. "You knew my mother?"

The pilgrim nodded. "When I first met Kateri, I was a man tormented," he said. "She could have slain me or turned me away, but she did not. Her words and deeds soothed the evil in my heart."

Though Alexi had been prepared to disbelieve Lysander, the old man's voice held an echo of sincerity. "Her tender attention persuaded me to leave the land of my birth and come to live among the folk of the Great Kingdom," the pilgrim continued. "It was she who guided me to the worship of Brigit."

Alexi's anger ebbed. His mother had shown this man kindness; he would at least show him patience. "If you have such respect for my mother, why won't you leave her son in peace?"

"You came here seeking guidance, did you not? Perhaps I have some to offer."

"What counsel can you possibly give to one cursed by the Darkening?" The knight turned away, ashamed to let Lysander see the deep pain still reflected in his eyes.

"Was it a curse, Alexi, or merely a message?"

Alexi looked out past the door of the crypt. Outside, the light of Belenus warmed and dried the earth; the air within the sepulcher, in contrast, remained cold and damp. Alexi closed his eyes. How he longed to bask in the radiance of Belenus's favor!

"I have been rejected by the god I would have willingly served unto death," Alexi said. "That

is, to me, the ultimate curse.”

“Consider otherwise, my friend. I believe that in the fullness of time, you will see that Belenus has another plan for you.”

Alexi turned to face Lysander again. “I don’t understand.”

“Do not the scriptures say that no man can fully comprehend the motives of the gods?” Lysander rose and rested a frail hand on Alexi’s arm. “For now, you need understand only this: Your god has not deserted you. Belenus still needs Alexi Shadowborn as his champion—but not in his Circle. Your path lies a different way.”

A chill that had nothing to do with the cold air ran up Alexi’s spine. “How can you know that?”

“I know many things you do not, Alexi. Some of my wisdom is born of age, and some gained through despair even greater than that which you feel now. But my problems belong to the past and are best left there.”

Alexi regarded the old man skeptically, but also felt a spark of hope flare within him. “If what you say is true, how do I find the path Belenus has chosen for me?”

“When my spirit was in turmoil so long ago, I searched for answers and found them in my heart.” He gestured toward Alexi’s chest. “Did not I tell you to do the same? What did you find?”

The only thing Alexi could feel in his heart at the moment was the vise of anguish yet gripping it. “That I still want, more than anything, to be a paladin.”

“Then what stops you?”

Alexi glared at Lysander. The pilgrim had seen the Darkening. He knew the answer perfectly well. “Belenus forbids it!”

The old man shook his head. “Belenus denied you entrance into the Circle. If you truly have the heart of a paladin, can you not still use your warrior’s training to serve your god by vanquishing his enemies?”

Alexi paused, searching the eyes that glowed from the darkness within Lysander’s hood. “Who would he have me tight?”

“I think you know.” The monk pulled his cowl even more firmly around his head. “As I told you yesterday, Alexi Shadowborn, search your dreams.” With that, he turned and shuffled away.

Alexi sank onto the bench. Which dreams was he to search? The horrific images of ghoulish unlife? He could hardly believe that Belenus would make walking corpses the subjects of Alexi’s lifework.

The nightmare of his being consumed by blackness? Alexi discarded the possibility. That prophecy had already come true with the Darkening.

The vision of his mother’s death? He paused. After all, it was this most recent dream that had brought Alexi to the crypt today. In an abstract way, would he receive guidance from his mother after all?

He considered the events of the dream. Kateri had been murdered in the Southern Empire while doing the work of Belenus in the wake of the Heretical Wars. In that sense, she had died a martyr. And to Alexi’s knowledge, her killer had never paid for his crime.

Was that the answer? Did Belenus seek justice for the slaying of his faithful champion?

If so, it was a quest no one could perform with as much determination as could Alexi. He would, after all, not be just a knight serving his god, but a son avenging his mother.

And as a member of the Circle, he never would have been permitted to do so. A paladin could not allow even the appearance of impure motives to tarnish his integrity. He would have been accused of seeking revenge for his own reasons, pursuing his own agenda instead of his god’s. The quest would have been forbidden.

But as a mere knight—nay, one considered a rogue knight after the Darkening—he had the freedom to choose his own quests. If he wanted to avenge his mother’s death, he could do so with impunity.

And if Belenus wanted him to, he would.

Was that, then, the reason for the Darkening—to enable Alexi to perform a holy quest that he otherwise could not have undertaken? If so, then his way indeed lay on a path other than the one traveled by the Knights of the Circle.

His path led due south.



He comes.

My agent has done his work well. The fool does not see that he makes only the choices I mandate. These pitiful creatures revel in their “free will.” They take such pleasure in going where they wish and doing as they please. They live their transient lives without the faintest notion of how easily I can manipulate them. In life and death, they are but puppets for such as I, with the resolution and knowledge to master them.

He will seek to destroy me.

It will be amusing to watch him learn the nature of the power that calls him. He will think his power is growing, until he feels unstoppable. Then he will draw his sword, proclaim his pitiful faith, and challenge me. Seconds later, his spirit in tatters and his body broken, he will die. And in death, he will serve me even better than he did in life.

He doesn’t know that I am a prisoner.

For so many years I have yearned to escape this place. I find it appalling that the spirit of a wretched mortal has contained me here, but soon that will no longer be a concern. The spirit of Kateri Shadowborn has grown strained to the breaking point as it strives to keep me contained within this prison. If that accursed trio of mortals had not trapped me, I would have swept her aside long ago and laughed at her final agony.

But I am twice chained.

Those mortals managed to seal me inside this metal shell. The fact that I have learned how to travel about in this form has made it no less a prison. It did not reduce my desire for revenge. I have destroyed the triad who brought me into this world, but not the woman who had once before driven me from it. How could I have known her power would transcend her worthless life? Her death should have freed me to travel her world and bend its pitiful inhabitants to my will. I should have been the master of this place. But somehow I became its prisoner.

And still she torments me.

Instead of roaming free to rule and destroy, I remain her prisoner. But the coming of this new warrior marks the beginning of the end for the spirit of that accursed woman. She has called many heroes to this land, hoping they would destroy me. One by one, the stinging insects came, and one by one I annihilated them. Each defeat saw her hold over me slacken. She has gradually come to accept that victory will never be hers. She knows that her champions are doomed even before they step into this realm.

When this boy dies, she will break.

He is her kin. The mortals place great importance in such things. When she sees one of her own line swept out of existence, the sight will undo her. Her despair will shatter the spiritual chains that hold me, and I will be free. Then her torment will begin. But why should I wait? Can her torture not begin now? I can make her suffer even before I shatter her hold over me.

“Kateri Shadowborn, I would speak with you.”

Her attention is slow in coming, certainly evidence of her failing will. Her spirit wanders, and she takes longer now to compose herself. When our time together began, she was quick to respond to my calls—such a considerate jailer. Perhaps she felt less certain of her power then. Whatever the case, I see she has finally taken notice of my summons. Caution hides within her spirit. She fears that I will challenge her will and break free. I sense her gathering her energy to do battle with me. It is tempting, but the hour for that has not yet come. I will bide my time.

“Another champion travels this way.”

I can hardly keep my laughter in check. She knows that no one has responded to her call. Indeed, I perceive that she no longer continues to summon warriors to her aid. It seems she has given up her foolish efforts to destroy me. Her confusion tastes sweet indeed, spiced with panic, fear, and apprehension. She demands to know more.

“His name is Shadowborn... Alexi Shadowborn.”

For a fleeting second, the endless darkness that encircles me resounds with my laughter. I cannot contain myself while I watch the shock register on her weakening mind. But no sooner has my mirth filled the void than another sound smothers it. This sound I had almost given up all hope of hearing. I force myself to silence, basking in the shrill resonance that echoes only in this region of darkness and confinement.

Kateri Shadowborn is screaming.



Pitch snorted eagerly and pranced on the hardpacked dirt. Standing beside him, Alexi patted the stallion's neck. "Take it easy," he whispered in the horse's ear. "We'll leave in just a few minutes. As soon as Ferran gets here with—"

"Ferran is here!" called the squire as he led Midnight out of the stable. He drew open one of the steed's saddlebags and dropped the last of their provisions inside. "Ready to go?"

Alexi soberly watched his brother. "I wish you would reconsider, Ferran." Last night Alexi had announced not only his quest but his intention to complete it alone. Ferran, however, had insisted upon accompanying him.

"This again?" Ferran shook his head.

"I told you, this journey isn't like our other adventures," Alexi said. "I don't know who our enemy is, and more importantly, I don't know for certain whether we have Belenus's protection." He felt a sense of foreboding about the journey, but nothing he could clearly identify. This morning, he had awakened once again to his ghoulish nightmares. The creatures had swarmed around him, biting and clawing at him. And then he had been one of them, feeling their utter evil permeate his heart. He woke up clutching his chest, and an aura of unease had gripped him ever since.

"I wouldn't be much of a squire if I let you ride into this battle alone." He met Alexi's gaze. "Or much of a brother."

Alexi studied Ferran's face. It held the most serious expression he had ever seen. He thanked Belenus for giving him such a devoted brother, one whose loyalty had not faltered even momentarily in the wake of the Darkening. "All right, then," he conceded. "Thank you, Ferran."

They led their horses to the front of the estate.

As they reached the reflecting pool that spread out before Shadowfast, Lord Vincent and Lady Victoria emerged from the manor and strode toward them, followed by Aurora. The girl shadowed her parents until they were about ten yards from her brothers. At that point, she broke forward and raced toward Midnight. The horse bent down its head and licked the side of her face.

"Aw, Aurora!" Ferran pulled her away from his normally proud steed.

Lord and Lady Shadowborn joined them. The early morning light seemed to deepen the lines of concern evident in both their faces.

"Are you sure you don't want to give this quest more thought, Alexi?" Lord Vincent asked. "After more than fifteen years, surely a few days more won't make a difference."

"Nor will a delay affect my determination." Alexi shook his head. "Please understand, Father. As I told you last night, this is something I need to do."

"We do understand," Lady Victoria said. "And we will pray to Belenus every morning for your safe return."

After hugging both her sons, Lady Victoria held out a bundle of black cloth to Ferran. He tilted his head inquisitively before reaching out to take it.

"The other night, we gave your brother a present," his mother said. "This morning, it's your turn."

Ferran undid the knotted golden cord encircling the black satin. As the strands fell away, the package unfolded, and the squire gasped to see a trio of silver-tipped, mahogany shafts inside.

"I can't accept these," he stammered. "These arrows were a gift to you, Mother."

"Actually they were a prize," said Lady Victoria with a smile. "His Highness, King Christopher, presented them to me after I was lucky enough to win a competition held in honor of his son's wedding."

"Luck had nothing to do with it," said Lord Vincent. "Your mother was the finest archer I'd ever seen."

"Ferran's better," said Aurora as she hugged the squire's leg. "He beats Mummy all the time."

"That's because your mother's much older now," said Lord Vincent. Then, as his wife shot him a stern gaze, he backtracked. "I, uh, don't mean that she's old, of course. She's just out of practice."

"No she's not," said Aurora innocently. "She practices almost every day."

Everyone chuckled, but the levity died quickly in the solemnity of parting. When the silence threatened to become oppressive, Alexi stepped forward and lifted his little sister in his arms for a hug. Then he turned to his mother.

"Hurry back," she said, her arms tight around her eldest son. At moments like this, it seemed impossible to Alexi that the woman who held him so tightly was not truly his mother.

"I will," Alexi assured her with a confident smile. Then he stepped back, slipped his foot into the stirrup, and took the saddle in a smooth vault. Pitch snorted contentedly at the familiar weight. After his own good-byes, Ferran followed suit and sprang onto Midnight's black leather saddle. Without further comment, the knight snapped Pitch's reins and the two horses set off.

Pitch needed no guidance down the familiar road. Their way lay through mostly forested terrain on the first leg of their journey, a fact that pleased Alexi, since they were unlikely to encounter many villagers. Already he had come to dread the reception they gave him since the Darkening.

They rode in silence. Alexi knew this was normally a time for lighthearted speculation about what might lie ahead, a chance for him and his brother to ease any trepidation about the dangers they might face. This time, however, Alexi couldn't even guess at the perils before them.

I ought to strike up a conversation with Ferran, Alexi thought, but he could contrive nothing that would ease his sense of dread. He knew Ferran probably sensed his distress, but the boy gave no indication that this wasn't the way every adventure started. And so the chirping of songbirds echoing among the trees was the only sound that accompanied the rhythmic hoofbeats.

Alexi noted that the leaves on many of the trees had begun turning color. Already Belenus had painted the treetops with his warm shades of red, orange, and gold as autumn asserted itself. What would the trees look like upon their return? Would heavy snow burden their branches? Would fragile buds grace their limbs? Would they wear the full crown of summer's glory?

Pitch's warning snort snapped Alexi's attention back to the road. He held up his hand, motioning Ferran to stop. At the crossroads some hundred yards ahead, where they would turn south onto the broad flagstone expanse of the King's Way, a dark mounted figure blocked their path.

Alexi leaned forward in his saddle and squinted to see the distant figure more clearly. As he did so, a chill wind blew past him and parted the branches of the forest canopy over the crossroads. For a brief second, a shaft of bland, filtered light fell upon all-too-familiar crimson robes.

"Lysander Greylocks," Alexi murmured, only half surprised to see the ancient pilgrim again.

"The man who healed my leg?" asked Ferran.

"The same." Alexi had kept to himself his second encounter with the old man at the crypt.

"What do you suppose he wants?"

What indeed? Alexi sighed, weary of Lysander's sudden appearances. "We might as well find out." He nudged Pitch forward. The war-horse snorted uneasily, apparently not caring for something about Greylocks.

"Good morning, Alexi Shadowborn," called Lysander as the brothers approached the crossroads.

"Good morning, Lysander Greylocks," said Alexi. "It seems our paths were destined to cross again."

"They may do more than cross," responded the old man. "If I am not mistaken, I believe that you ride south. As it happens, I am returning to my home in the southern provinces of the Great Kingdom. May I ride with you?"

Alexi knew that Lysander's company could prove beneficial to his mission. Not only was the pilgrim a skilled healer should misfortune befall them en route, but the man had known Kateri Shadowborn and might have more information to reveal. Yet there was still much Alexi didn't know about Lysander Greylocks. And as the scriptures of Belenus clearly stated, no enemy was more dangerous than the one sharing your campfire.

As Alexi considered the pilgrim's request, a small voice in his head told him to refuse: *The last thing you need is an old man dragging you down*, it warned.

"I'm afraid not," Alexi said. "While I'm grateful for the aid you've rendered me—us—in the past couple of days, we expect to confront danger. You'd be safer traveling alone."

"I understand," said Lysander. "But my request yet stands. As you have seen, I have healing powers that could prove useful if danger crosses our paths—"

No! The voice grew more insistent. It's bad enough that you have your younger brother tagging along.

Alexi blinked. Where had that sentiment come from? He had never considered Ferran's presence on the journey a liability; his reluctance to let the squire accompany him had stemmed from concern for his brother's safety—and the grief his parents would suffer if they lost two sons at once.

He shook his head to clear it, a gesture Lysander interpreted as a second refusal.

"I'm afraid you cannot refuse my request," said the old man in a stern voice. "You know as well as I that, according to the laws of this kingdom, a pilgrim is entitled to the protection of a knight who shares his destination."

Alexi was well aware of his obligation. "You cite a rule seldom invoked," he said, "but I am indeed bound to honor it. Very well, Greylocks. You have my protection as far as the southern provinces." In case the pilgrim had guessed his ultimate destination and intended to follow him farther, he added, "But once we reach the border of the Great Kingdom, my squire and I travel alone."

"As you wish."

Alexi snapped Pitch's reins. The horse clopped onto the King's Way and turned sharply to the south. Ferran and Midnight rode alongside. Lysander's rust-colored mare fell into step behind them.

"Alexi, why didn't you—"

"Shut up, Ferran." *Pesky kid.*

At Ferran's wounded look, contrition pricked Alexi. It wasn't like him to lose patience with his younger brother. "I'm sorry, Ferran," he said. "I seem to be in a foul temper this morning."

"It's okay."

How the silence of the trip hung even more uncomfortably. Alexi wanted to tell Ferran of his concerns but did not care to speak of them when the pilgrim would hear. Even if he were willing to risk being overheard, Alexi wasn't sure he even knew what to say. The old man had done him

no wrong. Indeed, he was more than partially responsible for the knight's current quest.

Why, then, had Alexi reacted so strongly to Lysander's request for protection? And why did Alexi suspect there was more to this old man than there seemed?

Apparently sensing that something more was amiss than Alexi's irritable mood, Ferran had shifted position in his saddle to make sure he could bring his bow into play easily. Alexi didn't think he need fear a physical attack from Lysander. After all, the pilgrim had opportunities to catch the knight in a more vulnerable state in earlier encounters. But Alexi did resolve to be watchful.

After several minutes, Lysander nudged his horse forward, pulling even with Alexi and Ferran. "I appreciate your hospitality," he said.

Alexi shrugged, casting a sidelong glance at his new companion. The fact that he still had not clearly seen the monk's face contributed to his unease. "As you said, I had no choice."

"Yes, you did," said Lysander. "You could have chosen to ignore the laws. As long as one retains free will, one has a choice. Just as this journey you undertake is your choice."

"You know our purpose, then?"

"I believe I do," said the pilgrim. "And I believe you have made the right choice. It is easier for a man to see the future if he puts the past to rest. Avenge Kateri Shadowborn's death, and you will face your own inner darkness as well."

At Lysander's words, the aura of disquiet hanging like a pall around Alexi's heart suddenly gripped him. For the second time since their initial meeting, Alexi sensed the pilgrim knew about his ghoulish nightmares. Was that the "inner darkness" he meant? Or did he merely refer to Alexi's despair following the Darkening?

"Alexi," Ferran whispered. "What's he talking about?"

Alexi cast their new companion a critical look. "Nothing, Ferran," he said. "Nothing at all."



With a loud pop, the campfire spat a shower of glowing embers into the blackness of the night. For a second, the sparks hung motionless, then a chill autumn breeze swept in and lifted them toward the sky. His hands clasped around his warm coffee mug, Alexi watched the little spots of light rise until they vanished into the night. Whether they faded out or became permanent fixtures of the heavens, he couldn't say.

He rose from his seat on a fallen log and lifted a pot from the fire. "More coffee?" he asked Lysander, filling his own mug. "It's a cold night." Unseasonably cold, he thought.

"No, thank you," came the rasping voice from beneath the red hood. "The chill doesn't seem natural, does it?"

Ferran stepped out of the darkness with a bundle of wood that he'd gathered from the forest around their campsite. "I thought the Borderwood was mostly elm and oak," he complained, "but this place is full of the sharpest, scratchiest pine I've ever seen."

Alexi started to answer, but the pilgrim spoke first. "The northern reaches of the Borderwood are full of pine," he said, "but as we travel farther south, they'll virtually disappear. By the time we pass into the southern provinces, you won't find anything but broadleaves."

With a crash, Ferran dropped his burden near the fire. This marked his fifth foraging expedition and finally brought their supply of wood to a level that should see them through the chilly night.

For a time, silence fell over the camp. The still darkness was punctuated only by the whoosh and snap of the fire. In the background, the hooting of owls and the sounds of other night creatures all blended to form a delicate, pleasant melody.

Alexi breathed in a deep lungful of sweet-smelling smoke and let it out in a long sigh. Under better circumstances, this would be a reasonably pleasant evening for camping, despite the chill. But tonight his thoughts were filled with his mother's murder and the steps he would need to take to identify and locate her killer once he reached the Southern Empire. The more he thought about what lay ahead, the more he realized he didn't know. Had he embarked on a hero's quest or a fool's errand?

Pitch snapped his head up and released an uneasy whinny. Alexi froze, noting that the sounds of the Borderwood had vanished. His eyes darted to Ferran, who was only a beat behind him in noticing the sudden descent of silence over their camp.

Lysander began to speak, but Alexi flashed a hand up to command silence. The pilgrim looked left and right. "What's wrong?" he whispered.

"Someone—or something—is moving toward our camp," responded Alexi. "Just keep looking into the fire and act as if nothing is wrong."

Lysander nodded almost imperceptibly.

Alexi rose and stretched in the dancing yellow light. He placed his hand on the hilt of his sword in a nonchalant fashion and slowly drew out the blade. "Ferran," he said casually, "fetch me a whetstone and some oil."

The squire hopped to his feet and loped over to horses. With as little fuss as he could manage, he picked up one of the saddlebags from the ground. Pulling it open, he drew out a buckskin pouch and brought it to Alexi.

Alexi accepted the package with a meaningful look at his brother, then dropped back to his seat beside the old man. He turned his sword over, allowing the firelight to trickle down its razor

edge. As he began to hone the weapon, he looked up again and nodded at his squire. "It's time for you to get some sleep, little brother. We have a long ride ahead of us tomorrow."

Ferran offered a muttered protest, exactly as he might have on any other night, then gave in. He moved away from the campfire and vanished through the flap of his small tent.

Anyone watching the campsite would have mistaken the shuffling sounds inside the tent for the normal noises of a young man getting ready to retire for the night. Alexi, however, knew better. He didn't have to see what was going on to know his squire was drawing a string across the graceful curves of his yew-wood bow. In a few seconds, all was quiet in the tent. The knight smiled. He knew that a steel-tipped arrow was nocked and ready to greet anyone who might threaten them.

With a steady, tapering motion, Alexi drew Corona across the rough surface of the whetstone. At the conclusion of every fifth or sixth stroke, he lifted the blade to examine its edge. As he repeated this ritual, he whispered to Lysander.

"I'm going to get up and leave you in a moment," he said, fairly certain that the grinding of the whetstone covered his every word. "Remain by the fire. Whoever waits out there should continue to watch you. I'll move around behind our visitor and take him by surprise."

"You mean I am the bait?" murmured the old man. Though Alexi assumed he must be afraid, his voice betrayed no emotion.

"Exactly." He gave Corona's edge a final taste of the whetstone and rose again. Drawing a chamois from the pouch, he deftly wiped the blade down, then returned it to its sheath.

"I think I'll turn in now as well," Alexi said in a normal voice. "But first I have a little business to tend to in the woods."

"Too much coffee?" offered the old man.

Alexi chuckled in response and then walked calmly away from the fire. He carefully left his hand on Corona's hilt but made sure he didn't appear on his guard.

As the branches of spruce trees stung him, Alexi moved quickly. He brought Corona out of its scabbard and circled the camp. In less than a minute, he came upon the edge of the King's Way and knelt behind the row of scrub that lined it.

His eyes, still partially blinded from the glare of the campfire, saw no sign of an enemy. For a second, Alexi thought that perhaps there was no one to see. Still, Pitch was seldom wrong when he sensed danger, and Alexi could feel the horse's tension from across the camp. *Something* was out here. He just had to find it.

As his eyes adjusted to the meager light offered by the stars on this as yet moonless night, he heard a faint, staccato sound. Steady and rhythmic, it was a sound he knew well—hoofbeats on a stone road.

Then he saw the outline of the intruder. The poor light hampered his vision, but he could see and hear that the approaching rider was armored. Did another knight ride this way, or was the horseman a traveling mercenary? Alexi bet on the latter. And would this warrior prove friend or foe? The Borderwood harbored as many evil swordsmen as honest ones, the stories said.

His sword drawn, Alexi stepped from the brush directly into the center of the King's Way. The approaching horse did not rear up as he had hoped, showing it to be an animal of good training and solid nerve. That was a bad sign, for it meant the beast was used to surprises—perhaps even combat.

By now Ferran should have slipped away from the camp as well. If nothing had gone wrong, the squire would have his bow drawn and be ready to drop the rider at the first sign of hostility. The lack of moonlight would make for a difficult shot, however. Alexi decided to improve his brother's aim.

"*Karnas, radamar,*" he commanded.

At once the blazing light of day burst from Corona. The trees, which only seconds before had been towering patches of darkness against an equally black sky, now blazed colors nearly as bright as the sword. Below, the stones of the highway stretched before him like a gray ribbon, while above, the stars instantly faded out of existence. To his wonder, Alexi found that the sudden brilliance did not blind him or even force him to shield his eyes. Somehow Corona's magic protected his vision from the sudden luminescence.

The approaching horse, however, was not so lucky. While it had bravely withstood Alexi's sudden appearance on the road, the onset of Corona's brilliant light broke its nerve. Whinnying in terror, the golden beast reared up on its hind legs and kicked madly at the air before it.

The armored figure, equally unprepared for the burst of light, pitched from the saddle. After a less than graceful arc through the air, mail met stone with a loud crash. Either unconscious or stunned by the fall, the rider lay motionless on the highway. A circular shield clattered to the ground beside its owner.

Alexi moved quickly. He reached the fallen knight and, for the first time, saw the four-pointed star and nimbus on the shield.

"Dasmaria!"

For a moment, he was convinced the fall from the saddle had killed her. Her features were still and her eyes closed. As fear began to grip his heart, a low groan slipped from her lips.

Relief washed over him as he checked for broken bones. In a few minutes, as she regained consciousness, Alexi was certain that Dasmaria's injuries would be limited to bruises and a cut or two.

"Are you trying to kill me?" she asked finally, slowly sitting up. She glared at Alexi, anger gleaming in her dark eyes.

"You're lucky I didn't," said Alexi as he got to his feet. "Sneaking up on our camp like that."

"I was riding down the middle of the road!"

Alexi held out a hand to Dasmaria. She grasped him about the wrist and pulled herself to her feet. After a few uncertain steps and a couple of deep breaths to get her lungs working again, she released his arm.

He searched her face, not quite knowing what to say to her. The last time they had spoken, he was preparing to take his place in the Circle. Since then, the Darkening had elevated Dasmaria to paladinhood by shrouding him in shame.

She met his gaze, and he could see reflected in her eyes all the awkwardness he felt. Silence hung between them. Finally she broke off eye contact, focusing instead on the glowing sword.

"Fantastic," she said in a hushed voice. "Is that Corona?"

"It is." Alexi could not help but marvel at the way the pure light glowed on her olive skin and illuminated the depths of her dark eyes.

Dasmaria reached out her hand tentatively. With her fingertips less than an inch from the flat of the blade, she suddenly became still. The wonder in her face mixed with trepidation. Then, as a look of confidence spread over her features, she stretched out her fingers to touch the glowing steel.

"It's cool to the touch," she said, "just like normal steel. I've never seen anything like it."

"Nor have I," said Alexi. "Would you like to hold it?"

She nodded. With a snap of his wrist, Alexi spun the blade about and handed her the weapon. She took the falcon-shaped hilt in her hand and reverently lifted the sword.

In that instant, darkness crashed down upon them. For a second, Alexi panicked. Had some evil smothered the magic of his sword? But although the sudden darkness obscured his vision, he sensed no immediate peril looming in the brush.

"What happened?" asked Dasmaria, her voice tinged with disappointment.

"I'm not sure," Alexi said. "Perhaps you have to activate it again."

"How do I do that?"

Alexi told her the words that he had spoken to bring light to the weapon, and she repeated them. Darkness, however, continued to envelop the highway.

"That won't work," came a voice from the edge of the forest. Dasmaria bent low, ready to strike with the sword in her hand. Alexi, recognizing the gravelly voice, laid a calming hand on her arm.

"It's all right, Das," he said. "That's Lysander Greylocks, a pilgrim traveling with me."

"A friend of yours?" She kept her voice too low for the approaching figure to hear.

"I'm not sure about that," he said just as softly. "But he's been with Ferran and me since we left the Shadowlands."

Dasmaria handed Corona back to Alexi, who slipped it smoothly into his scabbard. He turned to face the pilgrim as Dasmaria reached out to take the reins of her still jittery war-horse.

"Why won't Corona light for Dasmaria?" Alexi asked.

"Because she is not the child of Kateri Shadowborn," said the old pilgrim. "Do you know so little of magic and arcane weapons as to believe that just anyone can call upon the powers of a noble blade like Corona?"

"I admit to ignorance in such matters," said Alexi defensively.

There was a momentary pause, then the old man bowed slightly from the waist. "Forgive me," he said solemnly, "I meant no disrespect."

Alexi's muttered response was lost as he knelt to recover Dasmaria's shield. He handed the heavy disc to its owner and gestured toward the sanctuary of the glowing campfire. "Come," he said. "Our camp lies just ahead. I think we even have some stew left from dinner."

When the trio came into the light of the blazing campfire, Ferran joined them. As Alexi had expected, his younger brother had also circled into the woods. Dasmaria acknowledged the returning squire with a smile and handed Ember's reins to him, then released the catches on her helmet and slipped it from her head. Her raven braid spilled out onto her shoulder as she cocked her head to one side and then the other. Alexi knew the gesture well—such headgear could get quite heavy after a day on the road.

He swallowed hard and took a deep breath. "I never congratulated you on your Ascension," he said. "I know you'll bring more than your share of honor to the order."

"Thank you," she said stiffly. "I—" she met his gaze—"I truly wish the day had gone differently, Alexi."

As if hoping that putting some physical distance between them would dissipate the awkwardness they both felt, Dasmaria walked over to her amber mare. Although not a match for Pitch, Ember was a fine, spirited animal. Dasmaria hooked her helmet onto her saddle. "Keep an eye on this for me," she said affectionately, offering her mount a private smile.

As he sat down on the fallen log, Alexi shook his head in contemplation. He had known Dasmaria for years, ridden beside her on quests, and stood back to back with her in pitched battle. Never in all that time had he seen her treat anyone with the tenderness that she showed Ember. Even Shandra, her able young squire, received only Dasmaria's usual reserved treatment.

What made this beautiful woman keep her distance from everyone around her? Alexi doubted that anyone knew her better than he did, but he had no answer for his own question. And now that the Darkening had created such tension between them, he feared he would never crack her shell.

She stepped away from the horse, her stilted motions clearly showing the stiffness of a long

day in the saddle—and the sudden end that had come to that day. She reached beneath the yellow and red surcoat draped over her breastplate. After a few moments of effort, her fingers found and released the bindings holding her chausses on. With a slick sound, the chain mail leggings fell away to reveal the light brown buckskin beneath.

Dasmaria picked up the heavy chausses, folded them over, and stowed them in her saddlebag. Like Alexi, she chose to leave her metal breastplate on, and hence the chain mail hauberk that protected her arms. Both warriors had spent enough time in battle to feel a good deal safer with at least some armor on, even when there was no apparent danger.

With all that done, Dasmaria strode over to Alexi. “There’s only one thing that feels better than taking armor off—” she said, beginning the punch line of a joke so old that neither of them needed to hear it to enjoy it.

“—and that’s putting it on,” finished Alexi. Despite the awkwardness, it felt good to have Dasmaria here. Her presence made the journey seem more like former ones, before the Darkening. “I haven’t asked yet how you found us.”

“I was concerned about you, so I went to Shadowfast this morning,” she said. “Your parents told me that you had just left, and why. So I got my gear together and followed you.”

“Where’s Shandra?” Ferran asked.

“I left her behind,” said Dasmaria. She turned to Alexi. “Just as you should have done with your squire.” Her eyes held intensity. He had seen this expression in Dasmaria often, but usually just prior to battle. Something weighed heavily upon her.

“What do you mean?” Alexi asked.

Dasmaria glanced pointedly at Ferran.

Alexi was silent a moment. Then he rose and motioned Ferran away. “It’s time you got some sleep.”

Ferran looked as if he were considering a protest, then decided this was not the time to push his luck. Instead, he nodded obediently and slipped away.

Turning to offer similar advice to the old man, Alexi discovered that Lysander had gone. Clever man, he thought. The pilgrim must have gathered that this conversation was not for his ears. It was oft said that age begot wisdom.

He glanced back at Dasmaria. “You were saying?”

“You have no business embarking on this quest, Alexi.”

“Why?” The muscles in his jaw tightened. One day a paladin, and already Dasmaria was judging him.

“Because the Darkening...” She stopped, her expression pained.

Now every muscle in his body tensed. “Go ahead and say it, Dasmaria. Because of the Darkening, you think I’m unworthy.”

She shook her head. “That’s not what I was going to say.”

“What, then?”

“Alexi, the Darkening altered the whole course of your life. And just two days later, you ride off to take revenge on the whole Southern Empire? You’re going to get yourself killed.”

“You have so little faith in me?” he asked, her words twisting in his heart like barbs. Dasmaria was his closest friend, his staunchest ally. If she no longer believed in him, who would?

“I didn’t say that. It’s just that you’re only—”

“Only a knight?” His wounded spirit now burned with anger. “Is that it, Dasmaria? I’m a mere knight, not a *paladin* like you?” His fists clenched at her audacity. Wasn’t it enough that she had usurped his place in the Circle? Did she have to flaunt the fact?

“Only one man,” she finished stiffly. “You’re not being fair, Alexi.”

He'd learned this week that a lot of things weren't fair, he wanted to retort. But deep down, he knew she was right. She did not deserve to be the recipient of his pent-up anger, nor the envy that had wormed its way into his heart. The Darkening and its subsequent events had not been her doing.

"I'm sorry, Das," he said. "I thought I was handling this better." He sat down on the fallen log and stared into the fire.

Dasmaria sat down beside him. "Alexi, if I could change—"

"Don't." He turned to face her. "Belenus chose you, Dasmaria. And if the honor could not be mine, I would have chosen you, too."

She was silent a moment, her expression serious. "Alexi," she said finally, "I felt no joy after the Ascension service, for I knew the despair in your heart. I am your friend. You know that, don't you?"

He nodded. Her words soothed away some of the shame he felt at his outburst.

"Then you know that I'm here only to offer my help."

"I appreciate that," he said, "but the Darkening is my own burden to bear. There's nothing you can do."

"Isn't there? I think talking you out of this suicidal quest is something."

Why could no one trust his judgment? The quest wasn't suicidal, and he didn't want to be talked out of it—not by his father, and not by Dasmaria. Alexi stood and held out a hand to her. "Walk with me," he said quietly.

She took his fair hand in her darker fingers and rose. "Where are we going?"

"Just down the road a bit," he responded. "Ferran's already heard an earful, no doubt. He doesn't need to hear any more."

She dropped his hand and walked beside him away from the camp. In a matter of seconds, the darkness had swallowed up the welcome light of the campfire. Brigit, however, had finally started her ascent in the night sky. They headed back toward the highway.

"Tell me why you think this quest is suicidal," Alexi said as their feet struck the stone.

"Because I don't believe you've thought it through," she said.

Her statement forced a wry smile from him. "So we're back to this argument again, are we? Alexi rushes in where Dasmaria fears to tread?"

"I'm serious, Alexi. Ever since the Ascension, I've been doing a lot of thinking about the Darkening. I don't believe it was a sign that you were unworthy."

"No?" He stopped, searching her expression in the moonlight. "Then what did it mean?"

"Alexi, I've fought alongside you for years," she said. "If you were unclean, I think I would have noticed. No, I believe that the Darkening was a warning from Belenus that joining the Circle was not the path for you. I believe he calls you to another service, perhaps something even more noble than being a paladin."

Her words echoed Lysander's so closely that a shiver ran through him. Surely both of them could not be wrong.

"I think you need to return to the Shadowlands and work with the High Mother to discover what this calling is," Dasmaria continued. "If you run away on this personal vendetta—"

"I am not running away from anything. And seeking justice for my mother is no mere vendetta."

Dasmaria stepped back. "Forgive me, Alexi. It's difficult for me to talk about this. Perhaps I chose my words poorly." Pausing, she reached out her hands and clasped them around his. The display of tenderness surprised him, but he said nothing. "I only want to help you find your way."

Alexi looked into her eyes. "I think I know my way," he said. "I believe Belenus showed it to me in a dream."

"A dream? Tell me about it."

He related the vision he'd had of his mother's final hour, the traitor who had come for her, the evil sword that had slain her. He told her also of his encounters with Lysander. "The dream couldn't have been pure fancy, Das," he said when he had finished, "for that's how I learned the words to light Corona."

"This Lysander... do you trust him?"

"I'm not sure," he said. "He's a holy man, and he healed Ferran's broken leg. But I find his sudden appearances a little spooky."

"And coincidental." Dasmaria sighed. "I shall have to give this matter more thought. Meanwhile, we'd best get back to camp. Matins come early. Besides, we've been gone a long time, and I don't know if either of us trusts that old man enough to leave him with Ferran."

"Don't worry," Alexi said. He had seen his squire in battle many times. "If anything had happened at our camp, we would have heard it."

She nodded and turned with him to retrace their steps along the flagstone highway. Alexi felt a strange sense of relief at having confided in Dasmaria. While he had told Ferran and his parents the generalities of his dream, he could express only to Das all the emotions that had accompanied it.

During Alexi's recounting, Dasmaria had kept quiet. Now, as they stepped into the woods again, she finally voiced her opinion.

"I still think this quest may be ill-advised," she said. "But I also can tell that you're not going to turn back no matter what I say."

"You're right on the second count," said Alexi, "but I hope that you're wrong on the first."

"Me, too," she said softly. "Me, too."

With that, Dasmaria stopped walking. Alexi felt a tug on his shoulder as he started to take his next step. Only then did he realize they had been walking hand in hand. He turned to face her.

"Just to make sure I prove myself wrong," she almost whispered, "I think I'd better ride south with you for a time." Alexi blinked in surprise and started to respond, but she pressed a finger to his lips. "Don't say anything," she said, "or I'll have to invoke the same order of protection the old man did."

A smile touched his lips. "It will be my pleasure to act as guardian and protector for the honorable Dasmaria, Paladin of the Circle, as she rides through such dangerous country."

"Don't take the Borderwood so lightly," came the voice of Lysander, who seemed to materialize from the very darkness. Alexi, who started at the sudden arrival, noticed that Dasmaria had gone for her weapon the instant Greylocks spoke.

"Sneaking up on armed knights is a good way to get yourself killed," she cautioned, hand still gripping the gilt sword at her side.

"I'll have to remember that," said the pilgrim, "or I might die while I'm still young."

The old man pressed past them. Lysander took several steps, then pointed at something on the ground with the steel-shod tip of his staff. "Here's another one," he said grimly. "Take a look at this, Alexi. Your horse is more clever than we are."

Alexi and Dasmaria moved to see what the bent figure had discovered. There, clearly visible in the soft soil of the forest, were several newly made footprints. Although they looked human, there was something slightly wrong about them.

"It wasn't the young lady's arrival that upset Pitch," rasped Lysander, his expression unreadable behind the folds of his red hood. "We've had other company tonight. Ghouls."



Alexi drew in a lungful of thick, foul air and made a sour face. A trickle of sweat ran down from under his helmet, reminding him how miserably hot the weather had become this morning. The air had been so chilly when they broke camp at dawn that it seemed impossible for the temperature to have risen so high. Nevertheless, it had.

Swatting away a swarm of gnats and bloodflies, he reined Pitch to a halt and unrolled a map. Its edges curled in the humidity.

"This isn't right," he said, shaking his head. He turned to face his companions. "There's no swamp on the map."

"Forget the maps," growled Dasmaria as she, too, tried to chase away a relentless cloud of insects. "There isn't a swamp anywhere along the King's Way. I've traveled this road a dozen times since we moved from the southern provinces. Lysander, you must have done the same if you were born among the heretics."

Alexi looked to the old man's face, expecting to see some measure of disapproval at Dasmaria's tone. However, even the blistering heat had not caused him to draw back his crimson hood. Alexi and the others saw only an emotionless nod. "She is right, Alexi."

"Perhaps we're lost," said Ferran.

"That's impossible," Alexi snapped. "We haven't left the King's Way." He struggled to keep his irritation in check. None of them had gotten much sleep last night, since they had doubled up on watches because of the ghouls. Fortunately the creatures had not made a return appearance.

"Damn!" Alexi swatted at a bloodfly on his wrist. Already, his hands were covered with bites. Dasmaria raised a brow at his uncharacteristic oath but said nothing.

Alexi surveyed the situation. Behind them, the thick forest of the Borderwood spread out like a great living wall. Indeed, so sharp was the line of demarcation between forest and mire that Alexi and Pitch were clopping through stagnant water before Ferran, whose horse followed some thirty yards behind, had even left the cool shade of the trees.

The swamp stretched out from the edge of the forest on both sides of the King's Way. The murky gray and green water steamed under the intense sunlight. Tangles of trees, almost hidden beneath creepers and vines, rose like islands in the mire. Dark shapes, likely snakes or other predators, slithered through the water. Leaving the road to travel east or west was out of the question.

Ahead, the road south looked equally uninviting. Already half an inch of thick water spread across the road, cracks appeared in the flagstones, and outcroppings of dense, mosslike grasses threatened to trip the unwary traveler. Even the air seemed different in this place: It took an effort of will to breathe.

"Do we continue," asked Dasmaria, "or do we turn back?"

She already knew the answer, as did the others in the company. "Keep your weapons at hand, especially your bow, Ferran," Alexi said as he nudged Pitch forward. The other horses fell into step behind him. "We don't know what sort of creatures live in this cesspool."

They rode in silence most of the morning. The oppressive heat of the swamp and the sickly taste of the air made casual conversation too uncomfortable to be worth the effort. Besides, no one was in the mood for small talk. Occasionally someone would growl in irritation at a painful insect bite, but that was the extent of their dialogue.

Alexi noticed that the insects of the swamp seemed to ignore Lysander; no doubt the pests

could not bite through the heavy robes he wore. He wondered if the protection was worth it; those heavy robes must be uncomfortably hot. Indeed, he and Dasmaria were already wearing less armor than they normally did when riding. Both had chosen to remove and store the chain mail that protected their legs and arms. The knights still wore their breastplates and helmets, although the latter were in place primarily to keep the sun off their faces.

As they continued on, the mists thickened and the temperature rose, as though Belenus had focused his searing gaze on the offensive swamp water to boil it away. The relentless splashing of hooves became an almost soporific melody.

They plodded on, the miles crawling past. A thick mist gradually rose out of the swamp. Instead of being cool and refreshing, however, the mist was cloying and thick, more like steam than fog. Could they have found their way into some volcanic region? Certainly none appeared on the map, but neither did the swamp.

With the Eye of Belenus obscured by the mist, Alexi found it difficult to judge the passage of time. Every minute of riding through this vile place blurred into the next. With visibility so low that he couldn't see more than fifteen feet ahead, he couldn't fix on landmarks and use them to estimate their pace.

Even if he could see, Alexi doubted anything of interest lay ahead. Vine-choked trees and sickly-looking swamp plants offered little in the way of scenery. They had entered a realm that seemed to consist wholly of muck and heat.

When Alexi guessed that sunset approached, he signaled a halt. The group had come upon a ridge of stone and earth that offered something of an island where they could camp. It was slick with algae and could only barely be considered dry land, but they needed a break, and it was time for the knights to offer sunset devotions to Belenus.

As Ferran did his best to gather wood for a cookfire, Dasmaria and Alexi prayed to the sun god. Somewhat to Alexi's surprise, Lysander joined in the holy rite. Even though he was a follower of Brigit, not Belenus, he had certainly studied their customs well. Alexi doubted he would be able to return the compliment in kind when the moon goddess made her way into the night sky.

By the time they concluded the service, Ferran had a small cookfire started. Alexi actually felt thankful the wood was too wet and scarce for a larger blaze. The last thing this place needed was more heat or thicker air, though he hoped the smoke would ward off some of the insects. And the light would help illuminate the area once night fell. The four of them would have to be every bit as watchful as they were last night, though with luck they had left the ghouls far behind.

As he sent Ferran to the saddlebags for provisions, he noticed Lysander kneeling by the water's edge. Curious, Alexi stepped closer to the pilgrim—and watched in horror as Lysander filled the last of their drinking skins with murky swamp water. He snatched the leather pouch out of the old man's hand, but one sniff told him he was too late. All their precious water was tainted with the muck.

"Are you mad?" demanded Alexi. "We don't know how much farther we have to ride through this place! That might have been our only clean water for the next day or even a week!"

Dasmaria and Ferran sprang to his side. "What happened?" asked the squire anxiously.

"He filled our waterskins in the swamp!"

"We can try boiling it," suggested Ferran.

"It won't taste any better," said Dasmaria, her revulsion evident.

Lysander shook his head. "No matter what you might think of me, I am not a fool," he said calmly. "And I am not out to poison you, either. Please place the skin you hold over there with the others."

Alexi replaced the stopper and reluctantly did as told. When he stood up, Lysander motioned

for him to step back. The old man slowly opened his arms to the sky. Alexi noticed again how thin the pilgrim's arms were. The knight had seen mummified corpses with more life in them than this old man. It was a wonder he could match the pace of the younger riders.

In the ancient holy tongue, the same language that held such power over the magical Corona, Lysander chanted a prayer. For a man with a usually harsh and scratchy voice, the pilgrim's intonations sounded almost musical.

Alexi so thoroughly lost himself in Lysander's hypnotic prayers that before he realized it, the thick swamp air had swallowed the last of his words and the old man was reaching out to touch each of the waterskins. For a moment, the slate-gray sky seemed to slacken just enough to allow a trace of early evening moonlight to glint briefly on each of the skins.

The old man sighed, with either effort or satisfaction or both. He lifted one of the waterskins slowly, his arms shaking a bit with the effort. Turning unevenly, he handed his burden to Alexi. "Open it," he said softly, his voice rough again. "See what you think of the old fool now."

Alexi pulled the stopper and raised the plug to his nose, wrinkling his face in expectation. Then he glanced at Lysander in surprise. He put his lips to the spout and tilted his head back. Water drained into his mouth—not the hot, brackish fluid he'd expected, but cool, refreshing liquid that might have been freshly drawn from a mountain spring.

"Amazing," he said, wiping his mouth.

Dasmaria accepted the skin and took a tentative taste, her eyes widening in astonishment. Seconds later, Ferran did the same.

"I think the time has come for you to answer a few questions," Alexi said to Lysander. He turned to Ferran and instructed his squire to start making their evening meal. The boy looked disappointed to miss what promised to be a revealing exchange but did as he was told. Dasmaria moved to stand beside her fellow knight, presenting a unified front to the mysterious pilgrim.

"In the country of my birth," said Lysander, "we are more polite in asking questions of our elders."

"I mean no disrespect," said Alexi, "but there are things I must know before we continue. Until now I was content to just keep an eye on you while we rode. But with this display, circumstances have changed."

"I understand," the pilgrim said. "You fear the powers I just used on your behalf."

Alexi's eyes narrowed. "I fear nothing," he said. "But I am responsible for the safety of the entire company. If you are more than you appear to be, I must know."

"Very well," said Lysander. "Ask me your questions. And you need not worry. I shall answer them truthfully."

Before Alexi could begin his interrogation, however, the horses began to nicker loudly. The knights whirled as one, their blades flashing into their hands. Alexi called out a terse command and Pitch fell silent. Similar instructions by Dasmaria and Ferran stilled their mounts, although the animals all continued to fidget. Ferran appeared at his brother's side, bow in hand and a slender shaft ready to fly.

"Everyone form a ring," ordered Alexi. "Put your backs to the fire and prepare for an attack."

The others followed his instructions, Lysander taking the position to Alexi's left. The old man held no weapon, but radiated a self-confidence that announced his familiarity with combat. Alexi couldn't imagine the pilgrim as anything more than a hindrance in battle, but the old man had surprised him once already today.

The swampy waters around the campsite suddenly seemed to explode. All around them, black shapes erupted from the mire. At first glance, they might have been crocodiles or other natural creatures of the swamp. But Alexi knew better. He had encountered these beasts before.

Ghouls.

Though he'd seen them often enough in his dreams, Alexi still found it difficult to look upon the ranks of the cannibalistic dead. Their dry flesh stretched so taut over their bones that it gave them a jagged, spiky appearance. Mouths open wide in howls of fury showed rows of needlelike teeth that Alexi knew could easily flay the flesh from a man's bones. Wicked claws on the ends of unnaturally long fingers groped for him and his companions. Even the wretched air of the swamp could not smother the stench that hung about the creatures.

Ferran cried out in terror at the sight of the hideous beasts. He tried to hold his bow steady, but the arrow trembled nonetheless. Alexi found no fault in his brother's fear, remembering very clearly his own terror when he first faced the undead monsters.

Like Alexi, Dasmaria had battled such creatures before, but even so, she recoiled in disgust as they sprang toward her. Only Lysander seemed unaffected by the hideous foes. Alexi added that to his list of questions to ask the supposedly reformed heretic.

He abandoned his thoughts quickly, however, as two ghouls leapt upon him. He brought Corona around swiftly. The blade caught one of the revolting creatures cleanly in the neck and instantly severed its head. Black ichor as thick as tar bubbled from the open wound as the ghoul's momentum carried it past Alexi. It splashed into the murky water behind the knight and was instantly sucked beneath the surface. The other creature, seeing its fellow so swiftly dispatched, halted a moment to assess its enemy with glistening black eyes.

Out of the corner of his eye, Alexi saw Ferran. The boy had fallen back, hoping to keep his bow in play. The young squire loosed a shaft that buried itself deep in the chest of an advancing ghoul. The creature staggered forward two more steps, then toppled. Before it hit the ground, Ferran had another shaft in place and took aim at a second creature.

Suddenly the ghoul before Alexi lunged forward. It slashed at him with black claws and hissed toxic breath in his face. Alexi flashed Corona through the air. It passed effortlessly through the ghoul's wrists, cleanly removing its gnarled hands from gangly arms. Putrid black ichor boiled out of the wounds, and a shriek of agony filled the air.

Beyond the creatures, Alexi saw Dasmaria working with her usual smooth efficiency. Her golden blade flashed cleanly with every stroke. Indeed, from where Alexi stood, Dasmaria seemed to battle the beasts with bolts of golden lightning. Two ghouls fell quickly before her dancing blade, but another pair promptly moved in to take their place.

Three more ghouls advanced toward him. This time, Alexi took the initiative. As the creatures licked their needlelike teeth, their raspy tongues salivating at the thought of the marrow in his bones, the knight sprang forward. Before the restless dead knew what was happening, Alexi had cleanly beheaded one and skewered a second.

The third tried to attack from behind, but Alexi whirled in time to fend it off. The creature swiped at him. Alexi quickly backed out of reach. He had to avoid those filthy talons and their paralytic toxin at all costs. Again he aimed his strikes at the ghoul's hands, severing the offensive claws. Once the creature lost its primary weapon, it was easy work to slay the beast.

Alexi spun around to see if any more ghouls advanced and found himself staring straight at the bent form of Lysander Greylocks. The mysterious pilgrim now held a heavy mace in his hand. It was short but dangerous-looking, with a haft just over twelve inches long and a golden ball for a weight. Clearly this was an item of his faith, for the head of the weapon was brightly polished and looked almost like the moon itself.

But Lysander did not depend upon the weapon for safety. Instead, the monk seemed to be keeping the ghouls at bay with his free hand. Twice the creatures rose to attack Lysander, and twice the pilgrim drove them back with nothing more than a silver crescent moon on a chain: the symbol of Brigit. Alexi knew that especially pious priests and paladins had such powers over the ranks of the undead, but he hadn't realized that Lysander might be counted among that number.

Unless, that is, this attack was an elaborate hoax, orchestrated by a man who could command

the undead to do his bidding. Suspicion raced through Alexi's mind that perhaps the mysterious pilgrim was not actually driving the creatures away but commanding them to fall back until a later time.

Alexi, however, had no time to dwell on such thoughts. To his side, three more ghouls rose from the brackish water. At the same time, he heard a cry of pain behind him. He dared not turn his head to see what was happening, but the voice was Dasmaria's. One of the hideous creatures must have gotten past her whirling blade. Alexi shuddered to think of so profane a creature laying its twisted claws upon his companion.

But Alexi had his own problems. The three ghouls sprang at him, one of the beasts impaling itself on Corona in the process. Before a shocked Alexi could free the weapon, the other two creatures crashed headlong into him. Their putrid weight drove him back and, when two more of the beasts leapt upon him, bore him down to the ground.

The impact drove the air from his lungs and nearly sent Corona tumbling out of his hand. He thrashed about, trying in vain to free himself. Held fast to the lichen-covered rock upon which they had camped, Alexi found himself looking directly into the corpselike face of one of the ghouls. He gasped, retching at the smell of the creature's foul breath.

The ghoul leaned close, its black eyes glistening scant inches from Alexi's own. Its dry, leathery lips spread wide in a sadistic smile. Black saliva dribbled out of the fiend's mouth to splatter on Alexi's cheek as an almost serpentine tongue slipped out between them, stretching down to scrape across his face.

The powerful fingers of another ghoul tore off his helmet and grabbed fistfuls of hair. The monster forced back Alexi's head, straining his neck to the breaking point and exposing his throat. With a hissing laugh, the first ghoul opened its mouth wide and leaned forward.

Alexi tried to raise his sword, but his arm was pinned. If only he could distract—

Two words flashed into his mind. Although he could hardly even breathe with his head forced so far back, Alexi forced himself to speak. "*Karnas...*" he croaked.

The creature's teeth touched the delicate flesh of his throat. The sadistic beast moved slowly, enjoying every lingering second of this horrid *coup de grace*.

"... *radamar.*"

Brilliant shafts of pure, holy light flooded the twilight. The ghouls cried out in an agony so terrible that Alexi almost felt sympathy for them. The smell of burning flesh filled his nostrils.

Where golden light touched the exposed skin of the living dead, coils of smoke twisted into the air. The undead flesh boiled, blackened, then smoldered away to expose the bone beneath. Free of the arms that had restrained him, Alexi forced his way clear of the smoking, shrieking corpses.

Corona's radiance was affecting all the ghouls in the same manner. Those who could still move shuffled away as quickly as they could into the outlying darkness. One of the ghouls, however, a creature taller and more powerfully built than its peers, hesitated for a second. Even as its skin blistered under the light of the holy sword, the malevolent creature fixed Alexi with a withering gaze of pure, unbridled hatred. Then, snarling like a rabid dog, it joined the rest in retreat.

Even as the beast turned away from him, Alexi saw that it bore a crimson mark on its forehead. Contrasting sharply with the sickly gray flesh, the tattoo was the same horned death's-head that Alexi had seen on the graveyard ghouls. What could the emblem mean?

He had no time to contemplate it. All at once, Alexi was seized by anguish and agony so great it brought him to his knees.

The scene around him dimmed until it finally faded into blackness. Pain seared his chest. He doubled over, scarcely able to move.

Images of death and undeath flashed before him. Crypts, coffins, graveyards, ghouls. Dark shapes conducting unholy rites in inhuman voices. An altar inscribed with a horned death's-head.

It was happening again. Just as when he had killed the ghouls in the cemetery, their existences somehow merged with his own. Only this time, it was worse. Much worse.

A malevolent force pressed upon his spirit, trying to smother it. He focused all his energy on fending it off but could not. It found a crack in his defenses—a crack, Alexi somehow realized, left there by the first incident—and entered his heart like a shard of ice. Coldness beyond his ken seeped into his chest. From there, the malignancy attempted to spread throughout his being.

No! He had to contain it, had to keep it from dominating his will. He gripped Corona reflexively, but all his warrior's training could not help him in this battle.

Alexi convulsed. He knew he was losing the struggle. He could feel the negative energy battering for release, feel his own resistance failing. He couldn't hold out much longer.

In desperation, his spirit cried out. Belenus, help me!

And then it was over.

The sinister force left him. Belenus had answered his prayer.

Gasping for air, Alexi opened his eyes. He lay curled in a fetal position, Corona still clenched in his hand. The sword still glowed with Belenus's light, but the warmth could not dispel the cold that clung to his heart.

Trembling, he rose to his feet. He turned to see whether any of his companions had noticed his seizure. Lysander stood with his back to Alexi, watching the last of the few surviving ghouls vanish up the road and into the night. Alexi glanced around, trying to spot the others.

The sight of Dasmaria nearly made his heart stop.

"Dasmaria!" he cried.

She lay flat on her back, the lower half of her body under the foul water. A lengthy gash exposed the bone in her forearm. Blood poured from the wound to form a scarlet pool on the slick black rock.

Alexi extinguished his glowing sword and buried the blade in its scabbard. In what seemed a single bound, he was beside the fallen warrior. Her dark features looked pale from loss of blood, and agony showed clearly on her face. Her eyes were wide open, and Alexi could clearly see the suffering in them.

Lysander joined him, kneeling beside the pair of warriors. "She can hear you," said the pilgrim, "but she can't respond. It's the doing of the ghouls. Their claws and fangs carry a toxin that paralyzes the muscles."

"I know," Alexi said. But it wasn't the paralysis that mattered right now. At the rate she was losing blood, Alexi knew Dasmaria would be dead in minutes.

He pressed his hands to the gash and felt the warm flow of blood wash over his fingers. He put all his strength into an effort to stanch the crimson torrent but knew at once that it was no good. This wound was too great for conventional healing.

"Lysander, can you heal her? Like you did Ferran?"

The pilgrim nodded. "I can try."

Alexi moved aside to make room for Lysander. The old man placed his withered hands on either side of the wound. He began to pray fervently, holy words in an ancient language calling upon the healing powers of Brigit to aid the fallen paladin.

As Lysander prayed, Alexi whispered words of his own. "You're going to be all right, Das," he said in her ear, recalling the terror he had endured while lying paralyzed and vulnerable. "Lysander is a skilled healer, and we're going to watch over you until you can move again."

Alexi could almost feel the warmth spread outward from Lysander's hands as he watched the unnatural sight of muscle and flesh knitting before his eyes. If only that same warmth could penetrate the knot of cold still within his chest.

Was this response a normal after-effect of fighting ghouls? Alexi pushed the thought from his mind. Right now Dasmaria had to be his chief concern.

Finally the flow of blood slowed and stopped. Lysander slumped back. Alexi took his place at Dasmaria's side and drew her limp body up in his arms.

"Alexi," said Lysander in a soft but urgent tone.

Cradling Dasmaria, the knight pulled her clear of the filthy water. Her even, smooth breathing indicated that the paralysis of the ghoulish toxins was fading—no doubt the potent healing power of Brigit had helped to free her of that poison as well.

"Alexi," repeated the old man.

"Yes, Lysander?" He tore his gaze away from Dasmaria's face to look at the old man.

"Ferran is gone. The ghouls have taken him."



“Damn it, Lysander!”

Alexi was tempted to yank off the pilgrim’s cowl so he could see Lysander’s face. Yelling at a large red hood provided little release for his ire. “Why didn’t you say something sooner?”

Lysander shrugged. “What could you have done sooner? Abandoned a wounded paladin to save a squire?”

“He’s my brother!”

“In combat, he is your servant,” he replied calmly, despite Alexi’s agitation. “If you cannot keep that in perspective, you should get a new squire.”

Rage flooded Alexi. He wanted to strike the callous old man. “What the hell kind of cleric are you?”

“A practical one. What kind of knight are you to curse at me thus?”

Alexi stormed off to collect his helm and other pieces of armor he’d removed when they made camp. He couldn’t believe his brother was gone, taken away by those revolting creatures, and Lysander had allowed precious minutes to elapse before speaking a word. His gorge rose at the thought of Ferran being held by the ghouls. Was he dead, or had he been taken for some more sinister purpose?

“How long before Dasmaria can ride?” he barked, donning his chausses.

“Two or three hours yet,” Lysander said. The pilgrim had returned to his patient’s side. “She should be able to talk soon, though.”

Alexi cursed under his breath. He hated leaving Das alone with the pilgrim, but had little choice. “Good. She can tell you what an idiot you are.”

Once Alexi had put on the rest of his armor, he whistled for Pitch. “I’m going to pursue them south,” he said. “Follow as soon as Dasmaria is able.”

Without waiting for the old man’s response, he mounted Pitch and galloped off. The stallion’s hooves hammered on the broken flagstone road and threw sheets of water out with every step.

Hold on, Ferran, Alexi thought. I’m coming. The broken branches and disturbed plants along the side of the road marked the ghouls’ trail and encouraged him. Surely he was moving far faster than the ghouls. No matter how swift the living dead might be, Pitch was more than their match.

The cold spot in his chest from the attack of the ghouls throbbed. He tried to ignore it, focusing his thoughts on Ferran. He would worry about himself only after his brother was out of danger—or avenged. He was going to slaughter the monsters, leave their rotting carcasses littering this whole vile swamp.

The icy ache grew with each breath, until finally Alexi gasped for air. He tried to rein in his thundering horse, but a barrage of foreign memories and sensations swept over him. Not again, he thought. Not now.

He grew dizzy, unable to tell where the real world ended and the ghostly universe of the ghouls began. He seemed to be flying—or falling. And then he lay still in utter darkness.

As in the graveyard, Alexi sensed that he now experienced the memories of one of the ghouls that had fallen under his blade. The blackness receded to reveal stone walls lit by flickering candlelight. His heart ached in his chest yet seemed not to beat. He smelled burning incense, felt the presence of someone standing over him.

And then he heard the voice.

"Is it done?"

The moment he heard it, Alexi knew it to be the voice of evil incarnate. The booming tones held no hint of humanity, no echo of mercy. At first Alexi thought it came from the figure near him, but then realized his error. The voice belonged to a power that was everywhere and nowhere.

"It is," the man standing over Alexi responded. The minion's voice implied absolute obedience. "The abbey is ours. All of the monks are dead. They await only your attention, my master."

"There are no survivors?"

"None."

"And the traitor?"

"He is counted among the dead."

"Then the time has come for the dead to walk again."

At that instant, Alexi knew pain greater than he had ever before withstood. Agony swept through his limbs as fire burned within his chest. Muscles and tissue became infused with new and blasphemous energies. He tried to cry out but had no voice.

And then it was over.

Alexi opened his eyes and had to blink several times before the world came into focus. He lay on his back in the murky waters of the swamp. His right arm throbbed with pain. He must have fallen from the saddle during the spell.

He heard the drumming of hooves and tried to reach for his sword. Pain shot through his arm and shoulder. No doubt about it, he had broken his arm. Awkwardly he pulled Corona from its scabbard with his left hand as he rose unsteadily to his feet. He could fight left-handed if he had to, though not as skillfully.

Pitch, however, seemed less concerned about the approaching rider. As Lysander's horse came into view, Alexi resheathed his sword. He leaned on Pitch's flank for support while he waited for the pilgrim to reach him.

"I heard you clatter to the ground from the camp," Lysander said. "What happened?"

"Pitch got spooked and threw me," Alexi said, gripping his limp arm. Pitch nickered as if to protest the lie.

Lysander climbed down from his mount. "Are you injured?"

"I think my arm is broken," Alexi said. "Can you heal it?"

"I'm afraid not," Lysander answered. "My powers of healing are limited. Dasmara's wounds were quite severe. I can set the bone for you, but I need to rest and meditate before I can heal the break."

Alexi shook his head and turned to mount Pitch. "Ferran can't wait that long."

"Alexi, you have no choice," the old man said. "I know you are angry with me right now, but consider this reasonably. You cannot take on a whole pack of ghouls by yourself with a broken arm." Lysander gestured up the road. "And while we stand here arguing, we leave Dasmara unprotected in her vulnerable state."

"But Ferran—"

"You might have more time than you think. If the ghouls only wanted to kill the boy, they could have done so right here." He rested a frail hand on Alexi's good arm. "At the very least, come back to the camp, let me set your arm, and wait until Dasmara can help you."

Alexi could not imagine sitting idle for hours while his brother remained in danger. But Lysander was right—he could not save Ferran by himself with a broken arm. Feeling as if he were admitting defeat, he swallowed hard and nodded. "All right."

He awkwardly climbed into Pitch's saddle and followed Lysander back to camp. The icy pain in his heart had subsided into a dull, cold ache, as if a chunk of ice the size of a peach pit lay embedded in his chest.

By the time the firelight came into view, the pain in his arm had begun to smother his anger at Lysander. If only the old man could heal him now, he wouldn't have to wait for Dasmara's paralysis to wear off.

Dasmara sat propped against a large rock, her arms still hanging limp at her sides. "Alexi, what happened?" she called as he entered camp. "Did you overtake them?"

"No." Alexi dismounted slowly, the uselessness of his arm affecting his sense of balance. He walked over to Dasmara and lowered himself to the ground in front of her. "I slipped from the saddle," he admitted, softly enough that Lysander couldn't hear.

Dasmara's brows shot up. "You what?" Despite her surprise, she kept her voice down to the level of his. "But, Alexi, you're an excellent—"

"There was more to it." He paused. "Das, I have to ask you something. When you fight ghouls—afterward, do you ever have... visions?"

She frowned. "What kind of visions?"

Foreboding flooded him. If she had to ask, she had probably never experienced them, which meant that what was happening to him wasn't normal. "Glimpses of the creature's life—or death." He swallowed. "Or undeath."

She regarded him closely. "No, Alexi. Nothing like that. But you do?"

He hesitated, not sure whether he wanted to divulge the details. The Darkening had cast enough doubts on his character without admitting that he also channeled the thoughts of the undead. But if he couldn't confide in Dasmara, to whom could he turn to help him make sense of the experiences?

Alexi nodded. "The first time it happened was just over a week ago."

She studied him closely, concern evident in her features. "And it happened again tonight? While you were riding just now?"

"Yes." He considered telling her about the earlier incident in the camp—the one that left the coldness in his chest—but somehow he didn't want to reveal that secret even to Dasmara.

Lysander shuffled over with a straight piece of wood and some strips of cloth. "Ready for me to set that arm?"

Alexi nodded. At Dasmara's quizzical expression, he explained that Lysander could not heal him right away. "But regardless, as soon as you're able, we go after Ferran."

The pilgrim removed Alexi's gauntlets, elbow and shoulder pieces, and brassard. He then pressed his fingers along Alexi's upper arm to determine the exact location of the break.

Alexi sucked in his breath. "There—that's it."

Lysander placed the length of wood along the arm. "I heard you telling Dasmara about having visions of the ghouls," he said as he tied the splint above and below the fracture.

Alexi jerked his head up and stared at Lysander. How had the old man heard them? They had taken care to speak softly, specifically to prevent him from listening.

"If you are of a mind to tell me as well about the visions," Lysander continued, "perhaps we can use the information to figure out where the ghouls have taken your brother."

Alexi wasn't of a mind to share anything with the old man after he had shown so little concern for Ferran earlier. Yet the knight would do anything to help his brother. Could they trust Lysander? He turned to Dasmara.

She understood the unspoken question. "If we pursue the ghouls with your arm broken, we need every advantage we can gain," she said.

Alexi knew she was right. He couldn't withhold information that might help Ferran. He turned back to Lysander. "In the vision, I was lying in a room with stone walls. It was very dark, but some candles were lit. I smelled incense."

"Were you alone?" Lysander asked. As Alexi spoke, the pilgrim created a sling for Alexi's forearm to take pressure off the broken bone.

"No. Someone was in the room with me, but I couldn't see him," Alexi said. "He was talking to someone, or *something*—a deep, ominous voice that echoed off the walls."

"What were they saying?" Dasmaria asked. She turned her head slightly to face him better, a sign that the ghoul toxin was loosening its hold on the muscles of her upper body.

"They spoke of an abbey—I think they had just conquered it." Alexi frowned, trying to recall the conversation exactly. "They said all of the monks were dead, and that they awaited the master's attention." He turned to Lysander. "That's all I remember."

"I don't see that it will help us very much," said Dasmaria.

His ministrations finished, Lysander sat back. "On the contrary, my dear lady, Alexi's information could prove very useful." He glanced at Alexi. "I believe it holds clues to both your brother's whereabouts and your larger quest."

"This vision relates to my mother? How?" Alexi leaned forward, intrigued. What connection could a pack of ghouls have to his mother's crusades?

"In the final months of the Heretical Wars," said Lysander, "Kateri Shadowborn often spoke with a monk whose counsel proved invaluable to her. Once the wars ended, agents of the defeated Southern Empire made their way into the Great Kingdom. They went to Forenoon Abbey, the monastery where that monk served, and assassinated him and his brothers."

"Is that the abbey in my vision?" asked Alexi.

"I believe so," said Lysander. "If, as you say, the dead monks were 'awaiting their master,' it's possible that the unfortunate holy men were not allowed to rest in peace. The ghouls who attacked us tonight may well have been the undead remnants of the murdered monks of Forenoon Abbey."

Alexi shuddered. What an awful eternal existence for men who had devoted their lives to serving their god. "If your speculations prove true, what have they done with my brother?"

"They are probably carrying young Ferran back to their lair—the abbey itself."

"And you know where that is?" asked Dasmaria. Alexi thought he detected a trace of skepticism in her voice.

"I believe I do."

"Then we ride there as soon as possible," Alexi said.

Lysander shook his head. "Reaching the abbey is not that simple." He picked up a long stick and poked at the sputtering remains of the cookfire Ferran had started.

"Why? Does the abbey lie across a sea? Atop a mountain?" Alexi waved his hand in dismissal. "Whatever the terrain, we can handle it."

The old pilgrim sighed. "Alexi, you do not understand." The rekindled flames cast an eerie glow on Lysander's crimson hood, obscuring his face even more deeply in shadow. "Since its destruction, the abbey lies in another world altogether."



Alexi and Dasmaria exchanged glances.

“What do you mean, ‘another world altogether?’” Dasmaria asked.

“The land in which we now stand borders a strange, dark land not found on any map,” said Lysander.

As the old man spoke, he again poked at the cookfire. Each time the embers flared, however, the thick, wet air choked them down again. He tossed more kindling into the tentative blaze. It sat there as the flames lapped at it, apparently refusing to burn.

Alexi frowned, trying to comprehend Lysander’s meaning. “What can you tell us about it?”

“I have tried to learn its history and origins—no small challenge, for the local populace oddly has little interest in such topics,” Lysander said. “Based on my findings, I believe that this realm is of an artificial nature. In fact, evidence suggests that the creation of this place is tied directly to the death of Kateri Shadowborn.”

Alexi frowned. “How so?” Though his mother had carved a place for herself in history during her short life, he found it hard to believe that her influence could have been as profound as Lysander intimated.

“The land first came into being fifteen years ago,” Lysander said. “At that time, it consisted of nothing more than Shadowborn Manor and its grounds.”

“Shadowborn Manor?” asked Dasmaria.

“Kateri’s home. During her time in the south, Kateri Shadowborn commissioned the construction of a chateau similar to Shadowfast. She intended to live out her life there when she retired from her career as a paladin. It is my understanding that Shadowborn Manor was very similar to your own home, Alexi.”

“Almost identical,” Alexi murmured, remembering his dream. “I have seen it in a vision.”

“The one that inspired this quest?” asked Dasmaria. Alexi nodded.

“What exists beyond the estate, I cannot say,” continued Lysander. “I have found references in certain ancient texts to a realm of nightmares ruled by dark powers. I believe there is a connection, but nothing upon which I would care to expound without more research.”

He paused, getting up to retrieve one of the water-skins. “In the years that followed the creation of this land, it has grown like a living thing,” he said over his shoulder as he ambled toward their supplies. “What began as a small domain centered around the estate has gradually expanded. It is now an island of sorts some twenty-five miles across.”

“An island?” interrupted Dasmaria. “Surrounded by what sea?” Slowly she lifted one arm and flexed it.

Alexi was encouraged by this evidence of her recovery. “How does it feel?” he asked, nodding at the arm.

“It tingles sharply, like it’s been asleep.” She tried to lift her sword arm but could not yet do so.

Lysander returned with the waterskin. He also carried some nuts and dried fruit, which he handed to Alexi. “Here. Eat while you have a chance. We will need energy to fight the ghouls.”

Anxious to ride after Ferran, Alexi felt guilty about calmly having a meal while his brother remained in danger. But he knew Lysander was right. It would be a while before Dasmaria regained full mobility; they should at least use the time to replenish their strength. He took the

offered provisions and helped Dasmara eat the meager supper.

He noticed that Lysander was not partaking of their light meal. "Aren't you going to eat?"

"I am not hungry," Lysander answered.

Alexi found the old man's lack of appetite curious but was too intrigued by his story to give the matter much thought.

"As I was saying," continued Lysander, "no sea, but a swamp surrounds the land. If you ride away in any direction from Shadowborn Manor, which lies in the center of the island, you will encounter the morass that we traveled through to get here. Ride back into that expanse of heat, mists, and stagnant water and you will emerge elsewhere. In some cases, the road will lead you back to your home, the Great Kingdom."

"And in other cases?" Alexi asked.

"I do not know. Others—persons whose veracity have no reason to doubt—have told me they emerged elsewhere. My travels, however, have taken me only back to Avonleigh. Whenever I try to leave this dark domain, I emerge in your realm. When I desire to return here, any road that I take leads me to this place. I cannot say how or why that is the case, it just is."

"Do you labor under some sort of curse?" Alexi regarded the hooded figure. That might explain why Lysander never allowed anyone to see his face. Perhaps he was disfigured in some way, or found the full exposure of light on his eyes painful. Alexi had heard of similar curses—even seen them in force—during his travels.

"I can think of no better way to put it."

Dasmara shook her head. "This is absurd!" she said harshly. "How old is this swamp, then? Ten years? Five?"

"I should call the latter a more accurate estimate," Lysander said.

She swept her arm to indicate the drooping trees and lichen-covered rocks that surrounded their campsite. "Have you looked around? Trees like this don't grow to maturity in half a decade. Sure, plant life probably grows fast with all this heat and moisture, but these trees can't be less than twenty years old."

"Curious, is it not?" said Lysander.

Alexi rose to his feet, unable to sit still any longer. He rolled his neck to relieve the stiffness already forming from the sling. "Even if we accept what you've said, none of it explains exactly *how* my mother's death created such a place."

"Or why you've lured us here," added Dasmara coldly.

"I have not lured you anywhere, my dear lady," said Lysander. "Alexi freely chose to undertake this quest, just as you chose to join him. And he, not I, has led our party the whole way." He looked up at Alexi. "As for your question, I do not know exactly why your mother's death triggered the formation of this place, but I suspect it may be related to a highly dangerous mission she performed during the wars."

"Tell me about this mission," Alexi said.

"It is a rather long story."

"Unfortunately we have plenty of time." Alexi nodded at Dasmara. "If she gets up and walks away in the middle of it, you can finish as we ride after Ferran."

Lysander pressed his emaciated hands together, giving him an aspect of prayer or contemplation. He seemed to be making a considerable effort to search his memory and order his thoughts. "You are both familiar, I assume, with the causes of the Heretical Wars?" he asked.

"Of course," Dasmara said. "The Southern Empire moved against our southern provinces, threatening to annex some of the Great Kingdom's most holy places."

"Do you know why?"

“Because the people of the Southern Empire also claimed those lands in the name of their gods,” said Alexi.

“That is indeed what most people believe.” The old man nodded beneath his voluminous red robes. “But as I shall relate, it is not entirely accurate.

“In the years before the Heretical Wars, our nation was ruled by the peace-loving Muhdar ab Sang, the Grand Caliph. He was renowned for his wisdom and piety. His was a just and benevolent rule during which our people prospered. It was said that his dedication to our gods was so great that their avatars visited him in times of crisis. In those days, although people your age seldom know this, our two nations were at peace.”

“If he was such a wise man,” Dasmaria asked, “why did he lead your nation into war with ours?”

“He did not,” said the pilgrim.

Dasmaria’s face flushed with anger at Lysander’s denial. Alexi knew this was a delicate subject to bring up in her presence—her family, like his, had its ties to those bloody days. She leaned forward to glare at Lysander. “Do you mean to say our armies were the aggressors? I hope you don’t expect us to believe that! Everyone knows about the raids on Letour and Sanschay. Your peace-loving caliph had thousands of innocents put to the sword when his armies attacked those cities. Do you dare defend his actions?”

“Curb your anger, Dasmaria,” Lysander said, raising his hand. “I make no effort to deny the guilt and responsibility of my nation for the Heretical Wars.”

Alexi moved behind her and placed his hand on her shoulder, a gesture that seemed to calm her for the moment. “Continue,” she said tersely.

“One night, when the Grand Caliph was praying for guidance in his dealings with the north, a sinister presence came to him. Believing this dark creature to be an aspect of his god, Muhdar embraced him and accepted his counsel. Had he but recognized the malevolent nature of his visitor, he would have rejected the fiend at once. Instead, he unwittingly caused a war that would cost both our nations dearly.”

“You’re saying that Muhdar ab Sang, a man we have been taught to revile, was simply the pawn of some diabolic spirit?” asked Alexi.

“That is exactly what I am saying, young man,” said Lysander. “In our language, the creature who called on our Caliph was known as Lussimor. In your tongue, his name would be Ebonbane. I advise you to remember that name, Alexi Shadowborn, for it is one with which you of all people should be familiar. Remember it, and abhor it.”

The cold stone in Alexi’s chest grew icier. He shuddered, trying to shake off the chill that passed through him.

“Lussimor drove the blessed Muhdar to madness and corruption,” Lysander continued. “Our leader became cruel and violent. All the good he had done in his life was undone in the span of six short months. To ordinary citizens of the Southern Empire, the transformation of our leader was difficult to see. They were told that the crumbling changes in their daily lives were the fault of the Great Kingdom. But those who served in the palace could not mistake what was happening. One by one, as the truth dawned on them, they were slain and replaced with men who would follow the orders of the corrupted caliph without question.

“The most important of these new servants were the Ahltrian, a group of explorers and adventurers. They reported directly to the caliph, answering only to him and acting on his wishes without pause. It was the Ahltrian who oversaw the destruction of Letour and Sanschay.”

“You seem to know an awful lot about the inner workings of Muhdar’s government,” observed Dasmaria.

Lysander paused. “I, too, fell under the sway of that terrible creature,” he finally said. “I was a

member of the Ahltrian. Unlike my brothers, however, I discovered the truth. I saw that our caliph's will had been stripped from him."

"But you were not killed," said Alexi. Restless, he left Dasmaria's side and paced around the fire.

"The dark one, Ebonbane, saw a use in me," Lysander said.

The pain in Alexi's heart once again flared. He stuck his hand beneath his breastplate and massaged his chest, but the effort did little to ease his discomfort.

"The fiend dominated my will as he had my leader's," the pilgrim continued. "I became his puppet in the Ahltrian, making certain that no others learned what I had learned. To my eternal torment, I did things so terrible that I have vowed to speak of them only in my prayers, when I ask almighty Brigit for forgiveness."

Again the old man paused in his tale. It seemed that this admission had taken something out of him. Alexi studied Dasmaria. Her expression indicated that she didn't place much credence in the old man's words.

Alexi, on the other hand, believed the tale was largely true. He felt the anguish in Lysander's words, and for some reason, it touched him deeply. Perhaps he had done this tortured man a great disservice by doubting his motivations.

"And it was while under the influence of this fiend that you met my mother," Alexi said, recalling his conversation with Lysander in the crypt.

"Yes. I was commanded to attack a fortification overlooking the port city of Hammerlin. A company of knights was quartered there, and Ebonbane wished them destroyed. I carried out my mission—Brigit forgive me—and almost to a man, I exterminated those poor cavaliers.

"Those we did not kill were taken prisoner. Our intent was to bring them back to the caliph for interrogation. While these knights were in captivity, I ordered many terrible things to be done to them. I wanted to break their spirit. In those days, I did not understand the depths of the human heart and the resilience of a knight's spirit. One of the warriors, Kateri Shadowborn, refused to surrender her spirit to us. She led a handful of her kindred in a daring escape."

Alexi felt a surge of pride toward the mother he had never known. He prayed to Belenus that his spirit would prove as strong as he faced the challenges that lay ahead.

"When I returned to the caliph without captives, I was tortured. I was not killed, however, and so fared better than Kateri and her companions would have in the end."

The old man seemed to tremble with the grief of his memories. Alexi wondered if Lysander would suffer in the afterlife for his misdeeds. He seemed to be living in purgatory already.

Alexi knew that he should feel some degree of anger or indignation toward the former heretic. After all, here was a man who freely admitted that he had killed hundreds—thousands?—of Alexi's countrymen and tortured his kin. For all that, however, the knight felt only pity.

Dasmaria, on the other hand, fairly trembled with rage. Her fists were clenched and the muscles of her jaw pulled tight. She would require time before she could forgive Lysander's misdeeds—if, indeed, she ever did.

"Some two years later, the tables were turned on me," Lysander said. "While we rode through the Sined Pass, a company of knights charged forward to attack us. Although we outnumbered them, they conducted a masterful offense. In the end, I found myself a captive of the very woman who had once been my prisoner. I expected to be tortured and killed. Such retribution seemed no less than I deserved for my past cruelty, and it would certainly have been her fate if the situation had been reversed."

"No paladin of Belenus would mistreat a prisoner!" hissed Dasmaria through clenched teeth.

"I did not know such things in those days, Dasmaria." Lysander looked at her, but she turned her head away. He then addressed Alexi. "Kateri Shadowborn seemed to sense that I was

possessed by an evil presence. Instead of repaying my treatment of her in kind, she took steps to drive the evil from my body. With the aid of her god, a power which seemed at the time strange and alien to me, she freed me from the diabolical grip of Ebonbane. I was my own man again.”

The ache in Alexi’s chest flared sharply once more. He gasped, then coughed to cover his reaction.

“My gratitude to Kateri Shadowborn was and is unending,” said Lysander. “She repaid hatred and malice with compassion and sympathy. She returned to me a life that had been stolen away by the darkest of evils. But while her kindness buoyed my spirit, despair gripped the depths of my soul. The memory of the things I had done while under the fiend’s influence almost drove me to suicide.”

“But you acted under the domination of another,” said Alexi.

“In judging someone else, I would feel as you do,” said Lysander. “But as the scriptures tell us, it is easier to forgive another than one’s self.”

Alexi glanced at Dasmaraia, but he could not see her face. She bent her head down as she focused on massaging feeling back into her legs. As he watched, the thought struck Alexi that he wouldn’t mind helping her with that task.

He kept his hands to himself, however, and returned his attention to Lysander. “What kept you from taking your life?”

“Your mother,” he said. “Once again she proved my salvation. She conducted me to the doors of a monastery and placed me in the custody of the abbot. Under his care, my spirit was mended. I renounced my soldier’s ways and embraced a life of penitence.

“For a time, I lived among the monks and learned their rituals and scriptures. I believe they hoped I would join them in their worship of Belenus. Indeed, I very nearly did. I found, however, that it was the moon goddess who called me to her service.”

“Did you ever see my mother again?”

Lysander nodded. “From time to time, Kateri Shadowborn returned to visit me. Those days were the highlights of my existence.” His voice softened. “Kateri was a beautiful woman, and I was not so old then that her charms were lost on me.

“During her visits, I would do what I could to aid her military efforts. Often she would come with questions about the dark fiend and his plans. My years of intimate contact with the evil spirit enabled me to provide her with sound counsel. Armed with my advice, Kateri Shadowborn eventually confronted the dread Ebonbane, driving him out of our world and back into his own.”

As Lysander spoke of Kateri’s victory, the iciness in Alexi’s chest subsided once more into a dull presence. Perhaps it was merely the tale’s dramatic tension that had caused the increased ache. “And the caliph?” he asked.

“With the defeat of his master, Muhdar was returned to himself,” Lysander said. “He could not bear the knowledge of his sinister deeds, however. Within a fortnight, he was dead, slain by his own hand.”

“Assuming all this is true,” Dasmaraia said, her attention still focused on her legs, “how does it explain the mysterious domain you told us about?”

Lysander rose to his feet. “Unfortunately I have no solid answer for you. But I believe that Kateri’s battle with Ebonbane left its imprint on her spirit. One cannot face pure evil without being changed by the experience for all time—even beyond death. Sometimes I wonder if her spirit is yet locked in some eternal struggle with his, for when I enter this land, I sense his presence. Though it may be that I but feel an echo of his former hold on me.” The old man’s voice sounded more ancient and frail than Alexi had ever heard it. “Regardless, I have come to think of the mysterious domain as Ebonbane’s realm. Though the local populace call the island Shadowborn Manor, after the estate, I feel his influence more strongly than I do your mother’s.”

Lysander picked up the waterskin and provisions pack and carried them to the horses. He then started securing their other supplies to the mounts.

Alexi stepped over to Dasmaria, who had grown still and sat staring at the dying remains of the cookfire. Her features still held the rigid set of anger. "Das?" he said. "Are you all right?"

She nodded. "It's just that—" She fixed her gaze on Lysander. "It was very hard for me to listen to him."

"I know."

Sadness replaced the rancor in her eyes. "When I think of how many of my kin died in the holocaust at Sanschay, how my parents escaped so narrowly. And to learn that he oversaw it..."

"I know, Das." Her candor both surprised and touched him. Dasmaria normally kept her emotions bottled up so tight that no one could see them. That she trusted him with her feelings he took as a sign that they were indeed growing closer.

She glanced up at him. "How can you forgive Lysander so easily?"

Alexi sighed. "My mother was a victim of his crimes, and she forgave him. Brigit has forgiven him, too. If she hadn't, his healing prayers would go unanswered. If the sainted Kateri Shadowborn and the moon goddess can find it in their hearts to absolve Lysander, it is not my place to hold a grudge. Nor yours."

Her eyes narrowed. "How can you say that to me?"

"Das, have you forgotten you're a paladin now? If Kateri, a fellow Knight of the Circle, forgave Lysander, he has been pardoned by the rest of the Circle as well. You are bound to honor her decision."

She looked back at Lysander. "I had no idea my first challenge as a paladin would be such a difficult one."

"Belenus will help you."

She nodded absently. A moment later, she shifted her position and glanced at Alexi. "I think I'm ready to try standing."

"Thank the gods," he said. "I didn't want to rush you, but I don't think I can bear much more of a delay in going after Ferran."

He held out his hand to her. She took his wrist, and he pulled her to her feet. She wobbled, grabbing his shoulders to keep from falling. He slipped his arm around her for support. "Steady now. Got your balance?" He met her gaze.

She nodded but didn't let go of his shoulders. Her dark eyes regarded him as if seeing him for the first time. Alexi's heart stilled. Ever so slowly, he bent forward and touched his lips to hers.

He fully expected her to pull away. She didn't. Instead, she returned the kiss, leaning into him, sliding her hands down his shoulders.

"Ouch!"

"Your arm!" She glanced at the injured limb. "I'm sorry, Alexi. I forgot."

"It's okay, Das." He caught her gaze again and smiled. "Eventually we'll get this right."

She tentatively touched the splint. "Did I disturb it? Here, let me redo the ties."

Lysander approached. "You can do a great deal more, now that your paralysis has worn off. As a paladin, your touch has the power to heal. You can mend Alexi's arm."

At Lysander's words, jealousy crept into Alexi's heart. Had the Darkening not occurred, he—not Dasmaria—could perform the laying on of hands ritual. The icy core in his chest reached out to freeze his whole heart. Alexi stiffened, the closeness he had just felt with Dasmaria gone.

Dasmaria was still for a moment. "I... I don't know if I can," she said. "I've never tried to—"

"Do you doubt the power of your god?" asked Lysander.

“Of course not!”

“Then recall that Belenus, not you, will heal Alexi. Your hands but serve as an extension of Belenus’s own, just as Brigit guides mine.”

Dasmaria looked to Alexi, but he held his face impassive. If Ferran didn’t need his aid so badly, he’d have told Dasmaria to keep her damned gift.

“I’ll try,” she said.

“Excellent,” Lysander said. “I will guide you. First, place your hands on Alexi’s arm, one on either side of the broken bone.”

Dasmaria did as told, then closed her eyes and pursed her lips. Alexi knew that she had studied the word of healing; it was a verse of scripture anyone who hoped to become a member of the Circle was expected to study and memorize. Though he had committed it to memory, for Alexi it would never be more than a mere prayer for health and recovery. But for Dasmaria and others specially blessed, it was a magical invocation of great power.

Dasmaria recited the holy words. The almost musical verse, rhythmic cadence, and warm tones of her voice began at once to soothe Alexi’s pain. As she continued, a feeling of warmth grew where her hands touched his arm. The sting of pain subsided as a tugging, crawling sensation indicated that his bone was knitting itself together.

Dasmaria’s prayer also soothed his envious heart. The icy grip on his chest lost hold, freeing him to appreciate his friend’s new talent instead of begrudging her the gift he had been denied. Alexi regarded Dasmaria’s face. Her features seemed softened, as if the act of healing were drawing away the sometimes hard edge of her personality. As he watched her lips form the ancient words, he knew that the Circle would be well served by its newest member.

And he knew as well that his feelings for her ran deeper than he had ever imagined. When they had sorted through the mysteries of his past and avenged his mother’s death, perhaps then Dasmaria would be ready to sort through her feelings for him. He had already seen one treasure, the Rite of Ascension, slip through his fingers. He would not allow himself to lose another.

Dasmaria finished the ritual and opened her eyes. She met his gaze. “Better?” she asked softly.

He thought not of his arm but of the ugly feelings of envy she had washed from his heart. “Completely,” he answered.

“Then let us be off,” said Lysander.

Alexi yanked off the sling and splint, replacing them with the armor pieces Lysander had removed. Dasmaria, too, donned her gear for battle.

As they mounted their steeds, Alexi became aware of the icy sensation returning in his chest. He glanced around the swampy terrain, toward the site where he had battled the ghouls. There was something about this unknown land that clawed not only at his heart but at the edges of his mind. Was it, as Lysander speculated, the presence of Ebonbane? Or merely his own selfdoubt in the wake of the Darkening?

He addressed Lysander. “The monastery you sought shelter in—was that Forenoon Abbey, the place you think the ghouls are taking my brother?”

“It is,” he said solemnly.

“So you can lead us there?”

“Yes. The abbey is about two days’ journey from here. The road is not a good one.”

Alexi nodded grimly. “Then we’d best get started.” He glanced at Dasmaria, whose countenance reflected his own determination, then back at Lysander.

“Let’s go slay some ghouls.”



He calls himself “the Ghoul Lord.”

A laughably grandiose title. At best, he commands a legion of the dead, one hundred rotting corpses. They are nothing more than feral beasts who hunger for the flesh of their living kin. Is the lord of such creatures any more significant than the minions he rules? I think not.

He exists only at my will.

With gray skin stretched across grotesque features, he is as revolting to humans—his own kind, at one time—as he is to me. In life, he was a wizard. To be sure, he was powerful for his kind—a mighty sorcerer of considerable magical potency. By my reckoning, of course, he was an amateur who understood nothing of the powers he wielded. His energies were those of a mere spawnling. That he and his trifling friends could summon and contain me at all was a matter of trickery and deceit, not arcane knowledge or mystic skill.

Now he is no more than an extension of myself.

I make his senses my own. With just a moment’s concentration, I see what he sees, hear what he hears, know what he knows. I can observe the disintegrating stone walls of the crumbling monastery and smell the lingering remains of the incense that once burned there. I can even feel the offensive taint of goodness, a residue from the time when the place was sacred to light and life. How it is mine, a shrine to darkness and death.

The boy is brought in.

He was taken by the Ghoul Lord’s minions. The fact that such insignificant creatures captured him tells me all I need to know about this one’s power. He is nothing. They have bound his hands behind his back with leather straps. How such pitiful strips can restrain anyone, I cannot imagine, but they appear to be doing their work.

The Ghoul Lord bids him to advance.

The boy does not respond. He is a proud whelp, and a brave one. He trembles in the presence of so many enemies but conceals it well. How much more he would shiver if he knew his real enemy was not the Ghoul Lord but me. Could he even survive the knowledge of his foe’s true nature? At last the ghouls force him forward with a sharp blow to the back. To his credit, the child staggers without falling.

The boy vows to see the Ghoul Lord destroyed.

It is a hollow threat, of course. The child’s power falls far short of his captor’s. The Ghoul Lord knows this and laughs openly at the whelp. He motions to his minions, who land another blow upon the boy. This time it drives him to his knees. I wonder how much abuse his frail form can endure. He was clearly wounded in his capture. If the Ghoul Lord kills him, the boy will be of no use to me. The Ghoul Lord and all his wretched servants will follow him into damnation.

The Ghoul Lord makes his offer.

He tells the child that no one wishes him any harm. He assures him that he will be free to leave this place after their parley. The youngster scoffs, but I see hope light up his weak face. His is an emotional spirit, with feelings not easily hidden.

The softness of his heart will prove his undoing.

The Ghoul Lord presses on. He explains how the child can purchase his life simply by betraying the elder Shadowborn. A single arrow loosed in the darkness of night, and it is done. What could be simpler? As expected, the whelp refuses. He repeats his vow to see the Ghoul Lord destroyed and struggles to break his feeble bonds. This reaction pleases me, for I know what the

Ghoul Lord will do now.

A call goes out for the Vapir.

When she was alive, the Vapir was a creature of faith and devotion. She served a dark and sinister god. Had she known how little she meant to him, I wonder how faithfully she would have served. I suspect it would have mattered little. Like all mortals, she considered herself far more important than she ever could be.

The Vapir strides proudly into the chamber.

Such arrogance. She imagines herself more powerful than the Ghoul Lord. In truth, they are mere mites—fleas infesting a tiny corner of my universe. She moves with determination toward the pitiful youth while the Ghoul Lord assumes a position of authority. Their posturing is laughable.

Two ghouls grab the boy.

They haul him to his feet and drag him across the stone floor to the long-unused altar. Once this monastery was sacred to the god whom this boy would one day serve. In a vulgar physical display, one of the ghouls bites through the cords securing the boy's arms. With strength far beyond that of the child, the ghouls throw their prisoner onto the altar. Lifting iron manacles into place, they secure the young Shadowborn to the stone slab.

The Vapir advances.

She moves with a fluid motion, like the predator she has become. Her fingers trace themselves along the boy's face. Unlike the Ghoul Lord, her appearance has not greatly changed from what it was in life—with a single exception. All the color has drained from her skin, leaving it the hue of bone. In her own way, she proves as offensive to her former kind as the desiccated Ghoul Lord. The boy's shudder of revulsion at the sight of her says as much. She bends low over him. After pausing to lick her pallid lips with a translucent tongue, she presses them against his.

The boy screams.

It is a delight to hear the pure tones of his terror. Even before she begins her work, the Vapir wears down his resistance. It seems that she is not without promise in the science of inspiring fear. I must make note of this talent. It might be interesting to change my perspective, to share the Vapir's experience instead of the Ghoul Lord's.

The boy's outburst suddenly dies.

He has felt the intangible touch of the Vapir's mind. Her presence gradually flows into his own spirit. The boy thrashes back and forth, as if this physical resistance could hamper the Vapir's mental caress. A sudden paroxysm of pain rips through his body. He arches his back spasmodically. His eyes roll back in his head. For a split second, his entire body is rigid. Then, just as quickly, he collapses again.

I can resist no longer.

In an instant, I have abandoned my contact with the Ghoul Lord and become one with the Vapir. Her power courses along invisible conduits that trace unseen paths through the air between her and the boy. His thoughts are panicked and chaotic. No one has ever violated him so thoroughly before. He begins to weep. It is delightfully pitiful.

Then the Vapir begins her work.

She starts by sending out calming patterns. Like the rhythmic music of the spheres, her power rolls across his mind. Gradually she contains his horror, controls it. He tries several times to resist her, but his will is nothing compared to the power of the Vapir. In the end, the boy becomes little more than an extension of my creature. Another extension of myself.

Now she looks into his heart.

Within every being lurks something dark. No doubt the boy harbors secrets as well. Is it fear—

perhaps there is something upon which he cannot bear to look? Could it be doubt—a feeling that his faith is nothing more than a sham? Perhaps it is desire—a heart impure and tainted with lust. No. It is none of those things.

His weakness is envy.

The boy longs for the things that belong to his brother. He knows that, as the second son, he will always follow in the steps of the elder Shadowborn. Always, he fears, he will be known as the younger brother of Alexi Shadowborn. It is the child's greatest regret that he must be the squire and not the knight. The Vapir seeks to magnify this longing, turning this innocent rivalry into covetous resentment. But I think that will not be enough to serve my needs.

I force the Vapir aside and send a thought into the boy's mind.

It is one that he knows, but which he at first refuses to accept. I step aside, allowing the Vapir to regain contact. She repeats the thought. It is the truth, there is no denying that. In time, he will accept it. In time, it will dominate him. In time, it will destroy him. I can hear it echoing back and forth in his mind.

Alexi Shadowborn is not your brother.

How amusing to see the conflict in the boy's heart. He knows it to be true. He knows that he and the older Shadowborn lad are the spawn of different women. But he has always lived his life as if this were not the case. He wants to know that the prestige of his line will fall to him, not to his so-called brother. At the same time, though, he refuses to embrace anything the Vapir tells him. His resistance will gain him nothing. For good or evil, the truth is an insidious thing. It will eat away at him until he finally accepts it—especially with the Vapir's help.

The Vapir abandons him.

Quickly withdrawing her mental contact, she leaves the boy as shocked by her departure as he was by her arrival. As he regains control of his body again, he screams. For several minutes, he howls in panic and terror, breaking off his cries only long enough to gasp for air. I draw back from my minions as the Ghoul Lord orders the sobbing child dragged away and imprisoned.

My laughter echoes through my infernal home.



Nearly a day of hard riding brought Alexi and his companions to the edge of a broad, black river. What remained of the road vanished into the languid water and did not appear to continue into the forest on the far side.

Alexi wrinkled his nose at the smell wafting from the turbid water. It was an unnatural odor, born not of living matter, yet neither of decay. No, the scent seemed to be the very essence of the darkest emotions endured between birth and death—chaos, despair, anguish, grief. He tried not to breathe too deeply, afraid that to inhale the air was to invite those feelings to take hold of his spirit. And his spirit was already weighed down by the cold stone still chilling his heart.

He dismounted to have a closer look. A few seconds passed with only the sound of buzzing insects and croaking amphibians hanging in the air before Dasmara and Lysander followed his lead. Dasmara stepped to Alexi's side.

"I don't like the looks of that river," she said. He nodded in agreement.

"You are wise to exercise caution," said Lysander. Dasmara stiffened at his voice. She had spoken little to the old man since leaving camp, though the hard pace of their journey had limited any conversation.

"Does it contain predators?" Alexi tried to see into languid ribbon of water. He could only imagine what terrors might hide in that oily darkness. Sickly strands of water grasses swayed slowly in the shallows. Toward the center, occasional large shapes seemed to appear just beneath the surface. More than once, Alexi thought he saw large tentacles or fins emerge, but they disappeared so quickly that he wasn't sure he had really seen them.

"After a fashion," acknowledged the pilgrim. "The river has guardians, but they are not mere creatures of flesh and blood. This waterway marks the border of Ebonbane's domain."

Alexi felt a sinister shadow pass through him, like a spider creeping down his spine. He sensed someone, or something, watching him from the ghostly, moss-covered trees on the far riverbank. His wary glances, however, revealed nothing.

"On this side of the river," Lysander continued, "we are in a region that is neither under the dark one's sway nor free of his influence. On the other side, however..." He let his voice trail off.

Dasmara stepped to the river's edge and looked down into its depths. Kneeling, she stretched tentative fingers toward the water.

"Don't allow that river to touch your flesh," cautioned Lysander. "I believe that the water boils up from the depths of the Abyss itself. Touching it could well prove fatal."

Dasmara snatched back her hand. "How are we to cross it, then?"

"The way across this river is not a pleasant one," Lysander said in a heavy, serious voice.

Alexi gazed across the watery expanse. His brother was on the other side of that boundary, and nothing was going to keep him from crossing it. He looked into the blackness beneath Lysander's hood. "What must we do?"

Lysander said nothing. Instead, he walked to the edge of the river and reached into one of the many folds in his red robes. After a few seconds, he drew out a slender white flute. It was wrapped in a black cloth and had yellowed slightly with age.

"We must wait another few minutes," said Lysander. "We cannot cross the river until the sun has set."

At first Alexi thought the flute was made of ivory. Closer scrutiny, however, revealed that it

had been fashioned from bone—bone that looked too human for his liking. Dasmaria stepped toward the pilgrim. Something in her manner told Alexi that she had noticed the same thing.

“Is that what it appears to be?” she demanded.

“I am sorry to say that it is,” responded the pilgrim solemnly.

“That’s blasphemous!” she cried. “What kind of monster are you?” Her hand moved to the hilt of her sword, threatening to bring the deadly weapon into play. Alexi stepped forward, ready to interpose himself if necessary. Lysander held up one hand and Dasmaria stopped short. His fingers were spread in a gesture of truce.

“Perhaps I am a monster,” said Lysander. “Certainly I have committed monstrous acts in the past. History will judge me, as it judges us all. In this particular case, however, I believe you do not fully understand our situation.” His voice remained calm and composed, as if he hadn’t even noticed that the paladin stood ready to strike him down. “I had nothing to do with the creation of this object. I employ it now only because there is no other way by which we may cross this barrier.”

“There is always another way.” She turned to Alexi. “We cannot allow him to use that vile instrument.”

Alexi gazed at the flute. Though at first the pipe had filled him with revulsion, the same cold presence that chilled his heart cooled his reaction to the object. Perhaps using it was not so wrong—if they did so for a good reason. “Let Lysander do what he must,” he said.

Dasmaria stared at him with incredulous eyes. “Alexi, as a servant of Belenus, surely you can’t countenance—”

“Belenus be hanged! I’m not his servant—at least, not in any way that matters. You’re the only paladin here.” Resentment gnawed at his gut as the icy core in his heart expanded to fill his chest. How dare she appoint herself the moral conscience of the party?

He saw the shock on her face at being spoken to in such a manner, at his having taken Belenus’s name in vain. Somewhere in the back of his mind, he knew that he was not acting like himself. Was it the gloomy atmosphere or merely fear for his brother that had taken such hold of him?

“I’m sorry, Das,” he said, the chill in his chest receding. “Concern for Ferran clouds my mind.”

She searched his face for a long moment. “I understand,” she said finally. “Now, what of the flute?”

“I believe the good of our cause outweighs the evil of the instrument’s construction,” Alexi said. “When our work is done, we can destroy the thing.”

Dasmaria hesitated for a moment, indecision obvious on her face. Then, without a word of either protest or assent, she released her sword and stepped back.

“The sun has set,” proclaimed Lysander. Alexi couldn’t say how he knew this, for the vapors and shadows that surrounded them seemed unchanged.

Lysander lifted the flute into the darkness beneath his hood. The old man began to play, and Alexi’s breath caught in his throat. The flute produced low and somber music, unlike any he had heard before.

As the heavy music rolled through the air, darkness came on quickly. The faint residual rays of the departed sun were smothered by mournful notes that reminded Alexi of nothing so much as the groaning of a remorseful spirit. The shadows around them grew darker, the outlines of the trees more ghostly, the currents of the river more still.

The changes around them did not escape Dasmaria’s notice. She stepped closer to Alexi, her hand hovering near the hilt of her sword. Pitch and Ember shuffled nervously, snorting as they tasted the darkening air. Lysander’s horse seemed unaffected. Alexi found it hard to believe that the animal was so well trained that the macabre music and brooding atmosphere had no effect

on him.

A thick blanket of fog rose out of the river. It ascended as an unnatural mass of slowly churning vapors, the sort of effect Alexi had seen only in his nightmares. It swayed and rolled to the haunting music of Lysander's flute, mirroring the notes in coiling tendrils of fog.

A dark shape stirred within the vapors.

Alexi fought back the urge to unsheathe Corona and bring its radiance into being. He had decided to trust Lysander's judgment and didn't want to jeopardize the pilgrim's efforts. And yet the idea of some unknown creature, summoned by so offensive a magical item, cried out to the warrior for action. If he had any doubt about the nature of this place, it had long since fled. This mysterious land into which they had traveled was one of darkness and evil. He had no place here—or so he prayed.

The fading twilight had passed into full night now. The speed with which darkness had fallen would have alarmed Alexi anywhere else. Here, however, it seemed no less natural than anything else he had witnessed.

The dark shape drifted forward, gliding smoothly across the surface of the fog-shrouded river. Alexi heard the gentle sound of rippling water and knew that a boat was being slowly poled toward them. Beside him, Dasmara gasped. Alexi lifted his gaze toward the boatman and could not help but do the same.

The boatman was a gaunt figure, standing over six feet in height and draped in the tattered remnants of sackcloth and a funeral shroud. The torn, moldering remains of a hooded robe were fastened around his neck. Beneath the hood, Alexi could see the stranger's face, at least what there was of it. He found himself looking into the empty sockets of an ancient, yellowed skull. Pinpoints of crimson light burned where eyes should have been. Jagged teeth, anchored in a crooked jaw, formed the mirthless smile of the dead.

As the boatman bent forward to plant his long, slender pole in the riverbed, Alexi realized Lysander had stopped playing. The haunting melody of the flute was gone, although the mood of despair and doom that it created still hung heavily in the air.

"Lysander," whispered Alexi, his voice dry.

"Silence, my boy," answered the pilgrim. His hands moved again into the shadowy folds of his robes. Alexi split his attention between the slowly approaching skeleton and the old man, watching to see what Lysander would do now. With the flute wrapped in its black cloth and returned to whatever pocket had held it, the pilgrim drew out a small canvas pouch. He loosened the tie about it and slipped slender, bony fingers inside. Alexi could not help but notice that the old man's hands had little more flesh on them than those of the looming mariner.

"Take these," murmured Lysander, drawing something out of the pouch. Alexi held out his hand and felt two coins pressed into his palm. Reluctantly, Dasmara did the same. "One is for you," whispered Lysander, "the other is for your mount." He paused a moment, then handed Alexi a third coin. "For Ferran's horse."

Alexi regarded the cold metal discs in his hand. At first glance, they looked very much like the crowns used throughout Avonleigh. Instead of being minted from gleaming silver, however, they were cast from some black alloy. A shudder went through him as he remembered the black metal of the sword he had seen used against his mother.

As he looked up, the ferryman poled his boat to the river's edge. Alexi wondered that the craft was able to stay afloat. Like its master, the ramshackle boat was in sorry shape. Although its wooden framework seemed sturdy enough, the leather hides stretched around those timbers looked worn and tattered. Why the entire boat didn't fill with water, Alexi could not imagine.

"How do as I do, and only as I do, and all will be well." Lysander stepped boldly forward. The skeletal mariner held out his sepulchral hand, palm up, but made no sound. With slow

movements, Lysander held the two coins up for the boatman to see. The red glow of his eyes sparkled on the metal discs. Then the pilgrim gently deposited the coins in the outstretched palm. Bony fingers curled to make a fist. After a second, the hand opened again with no sign of the coins.

His offering apparently accepted, Lysander took the reins of his mount. He strode forward, with the horse following close behind, and moved carefully to the punt's stern. Catching Alexi's eye, the old man nodded.

Alexi moved forward. He clicked his tongue and Pitch trotted after him. Midnight, seeming to sense that this signal was meant for him as well, followed. The boatman held out his hand, fixing Alexi with his chilling gaze. The knight swallowed. He held out his three coins, fanning them so that the boatman could make an easy count. After a few seconds, he deftly turned his hand over and dropped the black coins into the mariner's bony palm. Once again the coins vanished into his fist.

Foreboding flashed through Alexi. The mysterious ache in his chest, already stronger than when they had left camp, had grown since they arrived on the riverbank. Now, as he stood facing the boatman, the iciness flared. Was Alexi somehow attuned to the sinister forces surrounding Ebonbane's realm? If so, what would happen once he actually crossed into it?

Lysander cleared his throat, and Alexi realized that he was delaying. He tugged for Pitch to follow and, with Midnight moving close behind, made his way onto the boat. When he turned to look back at the shore, he saw that Dasmaria had already stepped forward.

With the same self-assured confidence that had always impressed him, she flashed the coins upward. Allowing them to linger only for a moment, she brought her hand down sharply and snapped them into the bony palm. Even as the mariner made his customary fist, she led Ember onto the pitching boat.

The boatman paused a moment, as if he were waiting for another fare to arrive. Then, seeing no sign of another patron, he turned and stepped almost gingerly onto the boat. Planting the slender pole against the shore, he leaned heavily, and the boat lurched into the river.

As the shore fell slowly away, thick coils of vapor rose up to engulf them. The coolness of the vapors surprised Alexi. He had expected them to be warm and heavy and sickly, like the mists in the swamp. These, however, felt vibrant, almost alive. That thought sent a shudder through him.

As they crossed, Alexi felt a frostiness settle in his heart. Where once a chill the size of a stone had been, now a snowball-sized chunk of ice occupied his chest. What was happening to him? He tamped down his fear. He could not panic. Ferran needed him.

The boat landed against the far shore before Alexi even realized it was drawing near. Lysander, now standing closest to the shore, climbed out to stand on the firm soil of the riverbank. Alexi moved to follow, with Pitch and Midnight in tow. He hoped his companions didn't notice his haste to exit the brooding craft.

Once Dasmaria had joined them, Alexi turned to look back at the river. The swirling vapors had largely dissipated, taking with them any sign of the macabre ferry or its unnatural master. The dark night enveloped the swamp on the other side of the river as well.

Lysander spoke in a low tone, his voice filled with grim solemnity. "We have entered the domain of Ebonbane," he said. "From now on, be aware that every move you make may be your last.

"Death surrounds us. Let us be sure that it does not also overwhelm us."



Once off the eerie ferryboat, Alexi pushed his companions to continue as far as they could into the darkened forest. He itched to overtake the ghouls, to rescue his brother from their filthy clutches. He could not rest until he had ascertained Ferran's fate.

But before they had traveled very far into the forest, both Dasmaria and Lysander declared that further progress was impossible until morning. The road on this side of the river was rough and broken, resembling a dry streambed as much as anything else. Even though the moon made a wan effort to shed pale light over the place, travel remained nothing short of dangerous. To continue farther, they argued, meant risking a horse with a broken leg.

Alexi drew Corona from its scabbard and weighed the weapon in his hand. Two simple words would make it blaze with light, illuminating the whole of the forest around them. As he began to speak, however, Lysander cut him off.

"Better we should make camp and wait for sunrise than let everything in the surrounding forest know where we are," the old man said. Dasmaria nodded her agreement.

"By the face of Belenus, do neither of you care that every minute lost is another minute Ferran remains in danger?" Alexi exclaimed.

Dasmaria seemed taken aback by his oath. "We do share your concern, Alexi. But we're no good to Ferran dead."

"Damn it all," Alexi swore under his breath. At every turn, it seemed that he was forced to concede more time to the ghouls. Pressing his lips tightly together, he drove Corona sharply into its scabbard and reined Pitch to a halt.

Alexi dismounted and allowed his gaze to drift over the brooding forest around them. The trees were tangled and knotted, with branches that seemed to strain hungrily toward them. The skinny limbs looked like the withered remnants of the very ghouls they pursued. As a slow breeze slipped through the trees, leaves rustled and branches swayed. Owls called into the darkness, seeming to challenge their presence.

The moonlight fell upon them with a dim, pearly radiance. Most of it was blocked by the forest canopy or swallowed up by the endless darkness between the trees. Here and there, however, a slender shaft of pale light reached the floor of the forest. At each such point, an eerie radiance seemed to spread outward, as if the moonbeam caused the forest floor to glow on its own.

Out of the corner of his eye, Alexi thought he saw something moving through one of these radiant patches. When he looked more closely, however, he saw nothing.

He swore again. This whole realm got under his skin, sending prickles of unease racing along his spine. The place also seemed to amplify the pain in his chest, which licked at his heart like cold flames. The chill had seeped into his bones, almost making him regret leaving the heat of the swamp.

"Do we dare risk a small fire?" he asked. Not only would he appreciate the warmth, but also the opportunity to cook over it. He had eaten his fill of cold rations in the last few days. If they had to stop, they might as well indulge in a decent meal.

"We shall not need a fire," said Lysander. He reached into the folds of his cloak and drew forth a small black pouch, identical to the one from which he had produced the black coins. He stretched narrow fingers into the bag, emerging with a faintly glowing blue stone perhaps an inch in diameter and almost perfectly round. The stone threw off about as much light as a small oil lamp.

Lysander placed the stone upon the remains of a shattered tree that had fallen in some forgotten storm. It did an adequate job of illuminating the area around them, but did little to warm Alexi. And he knew that he wasn't going to be cooking over it.

In the increased light, Alexi again surveyed the area. Years of training for battle left him unhappy with their choice of a campsite. The woods were thick enough to prevent them from seeing approaching enemies, but not overgrown enough to prevent foes from sneaking up on them. Still, in the hour or so since they had left the river behind, he had seen no better place. The horses would provide warning if something drew too near.

Despite his misgivings about their location, Alexi removed his armor. He noticed that several yards away, Dasmaria did the same. After the heat of the swamp and their full day of riding, Alexi's skin itched and his cramped muscles needed stretching. As soon as he had a chance to work the kinks out of his back and neck, he would put some of it back on. He didn't want to pass the whole night in this place completely defenseless. Even now he kept his sword at his side.

Dasmaria approached him. "Alexi, we missed sunset devotions because of the river crossing," she said. "Hadn't we better offer our prayers to Belenus now?"

The last thing Alexi felt like doing at the moment was praying. He had too much nervous energy, too great a restlessness to continue their pursuit of the ghouls. "You go ahead, Das. I have other things I need to do."

Her eyebrows arched in question. Sunset devotions were an important ritual for paladins of Belenus and should be missed only in the most extreme circumstances.

But then, he wasn't a paladin, was he?

Alexi ignored the disappointment in Dasmaria's face and opened one of his saddlebags. He withdrew his whetstone and walked toward the light of Lysander's glowing sphere. As he unsheathed his sword and sat down, the old man regarded him askance.

"Did you not just sharpen your sword two nights ago?" Lysander inquired. The question drew Dasmaria's attention as well.

His tone rankled Alexi. Of all people, the pilgrim—who had just used a flute fashioned from a human femur to summon Belenus-knew-what to ferry them across the river—dared question his battle preparations?

"I want my blade sharp enough to split a hair," he said. Apparently satisfied, or at least discouraged from pursuing the matter further, Lysander turned to join Dasmaria in her devotions.

"So that when we fight the ghouls tomorrow, I can slice their vile heads clean off their shoulders," Alexi continued, drawing his blade over the sharpening stone. "And then gut their rotting entrails right out of their repulsive corpses."

Dasmaria regarded him in shock, her lips forming a round O. She stepped toward him, searching his face. "Alexi, you sound as if you intend to revel in the slaying."

He met her gaze evenly. "I do." He hoped to massacre the beasts.

"You know that's against the church's teachings. Belenus instructs us to kill only out of necessity and to take no pleasure in the act."

"Belenus never had a brother kidnapped by ghouls," he said. Alexi knew he spoke blasphemously, but he didn't care. Only revenge could thaw the chill in his heart.

At that moment, Pitch let out a sharp snort and pranced nervously. The animal's nostrils flared, trying to draw in a scent. The stallion's black ears thrust into the air, as if attempting to sort out a single sound from the nocturnal buzz of the forest. Ember echoed Pitch's every action.

"Kill that light," Alexi said softly to Lysander. He cursed himself for having removed his armor so soon, but there was no help for it now. Corona already in hand, Alexi saw that Dasmaria had drawn her sword as well. The pilgrim scooped up the radiant sphere and dropped it into the black pouch. The pale light vanished at once, leaving only the dim glow of the moon to

illuminate the area.

Or so it seemed at first.

Then Alexi saw a faintly shimmering figure advance from the depths of the forest. It moved forward slowly, shedding a faint green light as it came. The edges of the figure were soft and indistinct, like something seen in a dream. Long white hair trailed away in billowing tresses that blew endlessly in a delicate breeze that Alexi could not feel.

"A ghost," whispered Dasmaria. Her voice was marked as much by wonder as fear, something that Alexi understood instantly. In the presence of the ghouls, he had felt little more than revulsion. This apparition, however, seemed strangely beautiful. Its features were those of a lovely young woman. Softened by transformation into an ethereal creature and accented by the glow that surrounded her, she was indeed entrancing.

"More than one," said Lysander.

Alexi looked away from the first ghost and saw that several more of the spectral creatures were emerging from the depths of the forest. Each was a frail thing of gossamer, light, and indistinct edges. Some were male, others female, but each was a beautiful and splendid sight to behold. Could anything so wondrous be deadly? It seemed impossible, but Alexi knew better than that.

The spirits, accompanied by glowing orbs that floated in the air, formed a ring around Alexi and his companions. The horses snorted and shuffled in fear. Pitch and Ember, experienced as they were from many battles, seemed less panicked than Midnight. Lysander's mount appeared unconcerned by the circle of spirits. What horrors had the pilgrim's travels carried him through to allow the beast to take the presence of these supernatural creatures so lightly?

More colored lights moved forward from the tangled trees. They swooped forward, shimmering orbs of scintillating hues bobbing in the air. With the delicate movements of dancers, they whirled around the apparitions and then raced above the travelers. Alexi ducked instinctively, although the closest sphere didn't come within a yard of his head. Dasmaria struck at one with her sword as it shot past, but either her hand proved too slow or her blade did not affect the radiant sphere.

A baleful wailing drifted in the air. It began as a faint moaning, like the echoes of distant thunder, then swelled to become a deafening cacophony. Alexi tried not to listen to the overwhelming chorus of lamentations and shrieks, but it was impossible to ignore.

When he could bear it no longer, Alexi swept Corona into the air and allowed the multicolored wash of spectral light to play upon its gleaming blade for a moment.

"Karnas, radamar!"

For a fraction of a second, Alexi feared that the power of this ghostly horde had proven too great for Corona. But then the blade's radiance spread forth, driving back the spectral glow. Alexi sensed a resistance to the magic of Kateri Shadowborn's holy sword. While Corona's light managed to keep the supernatural denizens of this wood at bay, it appeared to do them no harm. He had apparently created a barrier through which they could not pass. But beyond that region, which was no more than thirty feet across, the incorporeal undead held sway. This was their land, and Alexi Shadowborn was nothing more than an intruder.

"Corona doesn't appear to have done much," he murmured.

"On the contrary," said Lysander. Like Dasmaria, he had taken up a position with his back to the center of their campsite. The triangle formed by the three companions made it possible for them to watch the whole of the ghostly assemblage but required them to speak to each other's backs. "You have bought us time. Corona is a powerful weapon. Any lesser enchantment would have done nothing in this place. Were it not for the pure light of your sword, we would even now be as they."

Alexi shivered at the terrible thought of becoming a ghost. He could accept the idea of death;

as a warrior, he had by necessity come to terms with it long ago. But the idea of roaming the earth eternally, denied the blessings of the afterlife and ultimate union with Belenus, was unacceptable. Should it appear that they were about to perish in this forest of the undead, he would see to it that his own blade ended their lives. If he had it within his power, he, Dasmara, and Lysander would never be condemned to such a fate.

But the matter could not be allowed to end so. If it did, his beloved brother Ferran had no one to save him from life as a revolting ghoul. Compared to the endless tortured existence of a ravenous walking corpse, the spectral half-life of a ghost seemed almost peaceful.

Lysander stepped forward, as if attempting to enter the long shadow thrown by Corona's glow. He spoke in the almost musical dialect of the ancient language. Alexi knew at once that he was casting a spell. He could feel Dasmara tense as the same thought occurred to her.

For nearly a minute, Lysander pronounced powerful words, gripping his mace before him. Alexi could feel magical energies gather in the air around them. As the pilgrim finished his incantation with a final harsh exclamation and a sudden gesture, those same powers were spent. What effect they were supposed to have had Alexi could not say. To him, nothing appeared changed.

"You!" commanded Lysander, addressing the woman whose spirit they had first seen. "Who are you?"

To his surprise, Alexi saw the beautiful spirit's mouth open. Her delicate voice was almost impossible to hear. With great effort, however, he discerned her words.

"I... am... Cassaldra." Her words hissed like wet firewood. The contempt in her voice was almost more audible than the words themselves. Clearly, she answered Lysander under the compulsion of his spell.

"Cassaldra." Lysander nodded, then gestured widely at their surroundings. "What is this place?"

"Our home," she answered. Her words came faster this time, as if she grew more accustomed to speaking. "Among the living, it is called the Phantasmal Forest."

Alexi looked around. Even without the unliving host of radiant spirits that surrounded them, the name was appropriate. Between the dark shadows and the gnarled trees that cast them, even an unimaginative observer would assume this place haunted.

"The domain in which we stand, that bordered by the black river," Lysander said. "Who rules it?"

"Ebonbane."

At that, a terrible howling broke from the unholy denizens of the Phantasmal Forest. The tortured screams of dying men, the keening of mourning women, and the wretched lamentations of the damned all combined to hammer Alexi's spirit. Within him, his heart nearly froze solid at the confirmation of their worst suspicions.

"Why do you serve Ebonbane?" demanded Lysander, shouting into the fury. "What power does that fiend have over you?"

Cassaldra's voice rose clear and sharp above the tempest. "We do not serve the evil one," she proclaimed. "We are his victims. One by one we fell to the sinister creatures that dwell in Forenoon Abbey. Our bodies have satisfied their hunger, but our spirits were not theirs to consume."

The howling showed no sign of abating, even when Lysander lowered his mace to the ground. "Then we have a common enemy," he proclaimed. "We ride to Forenoon Abbey to battle the ghouls and save the brother of this warrior beside me." The old man gestured at Alexi.

For a moment, the pilgrim's words appeared to have passed unheeded. Then the moaning and howling slackened. Cassaldra made an effort to step forward, but the light of Corona kept her

from doing so. Having failed at that, she assessed Lysander carefully, appearing to take his measure with her scintillating eyes.

"If this be true," she said quietly, "you have no enemies here."

"It is true," Lysander said. Alexi marveled at his composure. Here, standing face to face with dozens of spectral creatures, he was as calm as he had been at any time in their acquaintance.

"What proof have you of your intentions?" As the ghost spoke, the glow surrounding her seemed to flare brighter.

The spirit's question gave Lysander pause. Alexi knew what he was thinking. Should this gathering of the restless dead choose to oppose them, even if the ghosts did not directly attack, they would make it almost impossible for the trio to continue. If the spiritual army turned their supernatural power upon the party, their quest would come to an inglorious end.

But if Cassaldra could be convinced that Lysander spoke the truth... .

"Karnas, ramorte!"

The blazing sphere of light thrown off by Corona failed instantly at the warrior's command. In its wake, the shimmering blue-green radiance of the ghostly assemblage washed over the party and their mounts. It was an uneven glow with no warmth to it. Indeed, it seemed to chill Alexi's flesh where it fell.

Dasmara whirled to face him. Her wide eyes regarded him with incredulous alarm. "Are you mad? You have stripped us of our only protection!"

"I have shown them we mean them no harm," he said. But even as he spoke, Alexi knew Dasmara was right: If the spirits chose to strike now, they might well overwhelm the party before he could rekindle the holy blaze.

Cassaldra drifted forward, moving toward Lysander without appearing to take a step. The gossamer tendrils of mist surrounding her trailed behind like the train of long dress. Blue light twinkled in her cold, emotionless eyes.

When she reached a point directly before Lysander, the delicate spirit stopped. Her left arm rose stiffly, a slender finger reaching toward the pilgrim. Alexi tensed, fearing that the spirit was about to attack.

Cassaldra's fingers shimmered just shy of the old man's face. Alexi realized that he held his breath. He tried to lick his lips but found his mouth suddenly dry. His grip on Corona tightened.

"No lie has been spoken," proclaimed the ghostly woman.

Her voice carried through the forest like a cold wind, sending a tremor through Alexi even as it promised a sliver of hope. "You shall have one day to prove yourselves," she continued. "If tomorrow's sunset finds you still within the bounds of the Phantasmal Forest, you will become as we."

Alexi let out a long breath. He moved to Lysander's side, keeping Corona in hand. "We shall not disappoint you," Alexi said.

A whispered voice issued from beneath the crimson hood. "She will not acknowledge you, Alexi. It is the spell of Brigit that commands her to speak. As the hand of that power, I alone can communicate with her."

Alexi nodded. "Can you ask her about the abbey?"

Lysander turned to Cassaldra. "Will this road bring us to the ruins where the ghouls have made their lair?"

"It will. The Phantasmal Forest encircles that mournful place."

"When our work is done there," Lysander said, "we would ride on to challenge the master of this place."

"You intend to face Ebonbane?"

“We do.”

“Then your fate is sealed. You will join us.”

As these words escaped her lips, Cassaldra’s image grew indistinct. One by one, the whole of the company faded from sight. Cassaldra was the last to vanish, and Alexi thought that he saw a single tear on her alabaster cheek. Was that for us, he wondered, or herself?

“Your bravery does you credit,” Dasmara said to Lysander. She seemed to have softened her attitude toward the old man since earlier in the evening.

“Kind words,” said Lysander. “I am, however, quite unworthy of them.” Withdrawing his glowing stone from its pouch to illuminate the camp once again, he turned to face the two warriors. “You see, these woods hold no menace to me. Cassaldra’s host could do me no harm.”

“What do you mean?” asked Alexi.

Lysander was still for a moment. “I believe the time has come for you to know something more about me.”

The pilgrim’s withered hands reached upward. His bony fingers took hold of the crimson hood and drew it slowly back, allowing the blue light of his magical orb to flow across it. Even under that peculiar glow it was obvious that the old man’s flesh bore an unnatural pallor. Unnatural, Alexi realized, for a living thing.

But Lysander was no living thing. He was a corpse.



Lysander's skin drew tightly across the bones of his face, rendering him every bit as sepulchral-looking as the boatman who had brought them into this realm. His eyes bore the same sinister glow that Alexi had seen in those of the ghouls. The old man's throat was a mass of knotted tissues; the few patches of hair that remained on his withered scalp were tattered and white.

At a flash of movement in the corner of his eye, Alexi brought Corona around in a perfect arc to intercept Dasmara's sword with a loud clang! Had he not done so, Lysander's decapitated body would now lie on the broken road.

"Let him speak, Das!"

"Have you lost your senses? He is in league with our enemies!"

"You don't know that."

The two warriors stood still for a moment, their eyes locked. Then, without a word, Dasmara lowered her blade. She did not, however, return it to its scabbard.

Throughout this exchange, Lysander did not move. Alexi turned to him, trying his best not to stare—or recoil. This was the being whom he had allowed to share his campfire? From whom he had accepted counsel in the crypt? Who had touched Dasmara and Ferran with his shriveled hands to heal them?

At this final thought, a fraction of Alexi's horror abated. Lysander had aided them in times of crisis. And he had just prevented the ghosts from attacking his companions, even though the spirits held no threat to him personally. He at least deserved a chance to explain himself.

"Tell us how it is that you walk the earth," Alexi said tightly.

"I shall." He shuffled over to the fallen tree and sat down, gesturing for the two warriors to do the same. Alexi leaned on the far end of the tree, reluctant to get too close. Dasmara remained standing even farther away.

"I exist because of circumstances surrounding the death of Kateri Shadowborn. In order to tell you my own story, I must tell you also of Kateri's final days."

Alexi's thoughts turned to the dream he'd had of his mother's death. Could Lysander shed some light on the events he had witnessed? He motioned for the pilgrim to continue.

"A year or so after I had entered the monastery, Kateri Shadowborn led the armies of the Great Kingdom to victory in the Heretical Wars. The day of their triumph was greeted with celebrations throughout the Thirteen Provinces. On that same day, Kateri decided that she had seen enough warfare. She announced to the king and the High Mother her intention to retire her sword.

"Kateri's enemies, however, did not retire. Instead of accepting their defeat with grace, they plotted revenge. In the aftermath of the wars, several elite members of the Ahltrian sought each other out. They called themselves the Dark Triad, for they believed they were the only three survivors of that sinister order."

"They did not know of you?" Alexi asked.

"No. I suppose that even if they had, they would not have considered me a survivor. After all, I was living in a monastery under an assumed name and practicing a different faith. And as a friend of Kateri Shadowborn's, was hardly amenable to what they had in mind. You see, they wanted to call the fiend Ebonbane back into our world."

Alexi shuddered, a chill starting in his heart and sweeping through him. "Surely they realized

his evil?”

“That is precisely what appealed to the Dark Triad. They intended to command that horrible creature to obey them,” Lysander said. “Such foolishness was short-lived, however. As soon as Ebonbane appeared, he devoured their lives and left them as I—unliving creatures. He forced them to obey his every command.

“Having punished the Dark Triad for their folly, Ebonbane cast his gaze about the world in search of the woman who had defeated his armies and driven him from the world of men. With his baleful vision, he saw not only the lady in her retirement, but also me in my hermitage.

“The wicked being made his way to the forest around Forenoon Abbey and commanded the Dark Triad to bring me before him. When the corrupted creatures came to the abbey, my brothers attempted to hide me, to protect me. It was a foolish mistake. The triad slaughtered them all, killing them in terrible and painful ways. As they dragged me away from the monastery, I could hear the agonizing screams of my brothers.” Lysander’s long, bony fingers clenched tightly in the folds of his robe. “Words cannot express the misery I felt that night. Suffice it to say that their screams still echo in my ears.”

Alexi said nothing, but he knew exactly what the pilgrim meant. He had felt the ghouls’ deaths in the depths of his soul. Their screams, their agony, the fear that they felt in the last second before death—all were indelibly pressed upon his memory. The difference, Alexi supposed, was that he felt no remorse for the deaths of those fell things. They were nothing more than rabid beasts and deserved to die. But Lysander remembered them as the monks of Forenoon Abbey, innocent servants of Belenus who were attacked and slain in the name of evil.

“I, too, was killed. My horrified spirit watched as Ebonbane took control of my body. I—he—traveled to Shadowborn Manor. In the dead of night, in the guise of a friend, he arrived at the home of the woman who had saved not only my life, but my soul as well.”

Uneasy comprehension washed over Alexi. “It was *you*,” he said as images from his dream rushed before his eyes. “You were the monk who came to my mother’s door with that black-bladed sword. You killed her with it.”

Lysander met Alexi’s accusing glare. “Aye,” he said quietly. Then he lowered his gaze to the ground. “It was my body, but not my spirit.”

Alexi stood up and turned his back on Lysander, unable to look at the old man. Nausea roiled his stomach. The whole while he had journeyed to avenge his mother’s death, the murderer had ridden at his side.

The icy void in his heart filled with blackness. His hand itched to unsheath Corona and run the holy blade right through Lysander’s traitorous heart, then end his own foolish existence. Dark thoughts flooded his mind—vengeful, violent thoughts. He had seen the killer in his dream. How could he not have realized the old man’s guilt from the start? *Belenus, when you closed your eye to me, did I become blind, too?*

The supplication no sooner flashed through his head than a passage from the holy scriptures followed it: *Only the gods can see into a man’s soul*. Alexi recalled what he had said to Dasmara just last night, that Brigit had forgiven Lysander’s sins. She had seen into his soul and found him worthy of her gifts. It was Ebonbane, not Lysander, who had truly killed his mother. The fiend was the rightful target of Alexi’s vengeance.

He turned back to Lysander. “What happened after the murder?”

The pilgrim’s gaze remained lowered. “Ebonbane guided my body back to the monastery. He returned my spirit to my dead flesh and filled my dry bones with an animating force, then had me interred. Of all the monks who had lived at Forenoon Abbey before the coming of the Dark Triad, only I was given a grave to rest in. It seemed to amuse the fiend to leave me in a place where I could watch the tragedy that had been wrought in my name as it unfolded. For years I

lay in my grave, unable to act but keenly aware of what the abbey had become.”

“And that was?”

Lysander finally met Alexi’s gaze. “The triad turned it into a stronghold of evil. For a decade and a half, I lay in the earth. Every day of that imprisonment was pure torture. Every night, as the sun fell below the horizon, I watched men who had been good and just in life move out into the world in search of innocents to feast upon.

“As they gorged themselves on innocent flesh, I prayed to almighty Brigit. I begged her to give me the strength to rise from my grave to avenge the death of Kateri Shadowborn and all my brothers at Forenoon Abbey. About the time you became a knight, Brigit answered my prayers.

“While you gained combat experience, I gained as much knowledge as I could about Ebonbane and his realm. It was my hope that together we could avenge your mother’s death. I knew if ever there was an ally whose steel I could count on in this crusade, it would be the son of Kateri Shadowborn.”

Alexi regarded him for a long moment. Though the cold fury in his heart urged him to exact revenge on the emaciated old man, cold reason acknowledged that Lysander had merely been a weapon in the hand of a much stronger foe. Only with his help could Alexi bring Kateri Shadowborn’s real killer to justice.

Was this, then, the plan Belenus had for Alexi? To drive Ebonbane from the world, as his mother had before him? If so, the sun god had indeed chosen a different path for him to follow, and an unusual ally to accompany him.

“Ebonbane will pay for his crimes,” Alexi said.

As the words left his mouth, a searing pain shot through him, as if a stake of ice had been driven into his heart. He winced and turned away, drawing on every shred of his warrior’s discipline to prevent his face from revealing his agony.

“I thank you,” Lysander said. Alexi heard him draw his cowl back over his head. “And I apologize for making you look so long upon my decrepit form. I forget my own appearance sometimes.”

Thankful that the pilgrim mistook the cause of his distressed expression, Alexi merely nodded. The pain in his chest ebbed to a dull ache, though each beat of his heart magnified it.

He opened his eyes to see Dasmara turn on her heel and stride away without a word. She headed toward the edge of their campsite, beyond the reach of Lysander’s glowing stone.

Alexi followed her into the shadows. She looked somehow smaller to him as the darkness enveloped her, but then he realized it was because he rarely saw her without armor. Normally she wore at least a breastplate while in camp, but she hadn’t yet donned it since their incident with the ghosts.

Despite the lack of armament, she didn’t look defenseless. Dasmara held herself with a warrior’s confidence, her strength evident in every movement. At the moment, contempt was also evident in the firm set of her jaw and her ramrod posture. Was she disgusted with Lysander or with him?

He touched her shoulder. “Das?”

She shrugged off his hand. “How can you join forces with him, Alexi?” She did not face him, but rather stared into the dark forest. “Knowing what he is and what he did?”

He sighed, bringing his hand up to his own chest and trying to massage away the pain. “Lysander isn’t the real enemy. But he can help me defeat the creature who is.”

At last she turned toward him. “How do you know he isn’t just manipulating you?” She tried to search his eyes in the pale moonlight. “Alexi, the Darkening left you terribly uncertain about yourself and your relationship to Belenus. Lysander could be merely taking advantage of that to serve his own ends.”

He shook his head. "I admit the possibility exists. But deep inside, I don't think so."

At her skeptical look, he motioned for her to sit down with him. He dropped onto the long grass and rested his forearms on his bent knees. Reluctantly she, too, sat down.

"Ebonbane has to be stopped, Dasmaria. As a paladin, surely you realize that. If I don't do it, someone else must." Absently he rubbed his chest again. The cold ache receded, replaced by a heat that slowly coursed through his veins. "But I can feel Ebonbane, sense his influence in this land. I believe that through my mother, I have some sort of connection to the fiend, that only I can banish him. But I can't do it alone, Das. Lysander has critical information. Just as my mother needed his aid, I do, too."

She glanced toward Lysander, who seemed to be praying or meditating as he rested on the fallen log. "But even with Lysander's help, Ebonbane defeated your mother in the end by using her own ally against her." She turned back to Alexi. "If the famous Kateri Shadowborn could not prevail against the fiend, what makes you think you'll fare any better?"

He studied her face. The moonlight softened her features, bathing her in a glow almost as enchanting as that of the ghosts. "I hope I have an advantage she did not."

"And what is that?"

"You. Tell me you'll help me, Das. With you at my side, I know we'll succeed." He grew warmer, his blood seeming almost on fire. His heart beat in an odd rhythm.

"You know I'm not going to abandon you now." She sighed heavily, the strain of the past two days evident in her tired voice. "Of course I'll help."

Her pledge brought a smile to the corners of his mouth. "Good. We make a great team, you and I." He paused, then leaned toward her. "In more ways than one."

He gently touched his lips to hers. When she responded favorably, he deepened the kiss and slid his arms around her, pulling her body close to his. He reveled in the feel of her curves against the hard planes of his chest, unobstructed by the armor usually between them.

The close contact sent a current of desire through him. His pulse roared in his ears, its heat dizzying. He wanted Dasmaria, wanted to possess her, wanted to claim her as his own. Right now.

She broke off the kiss. "Alexi—"

He captured her lips again and pushed her to the ground, conscious only of the fire in his blood. As he kissed her hungrily, he brought his hand up to cup her breast.

"Alexi, no—"

Ignoring her muffled protests, he bore down on her with his full weight.

"No!" She pushed him off of her and rolled away, coming to her knees in a defensive position. Trying to catch her breath, she held her hand out as if to keep him from advancing again. "I'm not ready for this."

The burning sensation still coursed through him, blackness enveloping his heart. "Come on, Das," he said bitterly. "Just how long am I supposed to wait for you to make up your mind?"

She stared at him with bewildered eyes. "A few days ago you said to take all the time I needed."

"Things are different now." His gaze drifted to her swollen lips. He could still taste them, still feel their softness against his own. A spark of anger ignited within him. Dasmaria was nothing but a tease—one minute kissing him, the next minute pushing him away. He was a fool not to have realized it sooner.

"No, Alexi—you're different." She lowered her hand but kept her distance. "You're changing, Alexi."

He rose to his feet. "You don't know what in the name of Belenus you're talking about."

“No?” She rose and came to stand in front of him. “How about what you just said, to begin with? You never cursed before. Now you take Belenus’s name in vain at the slightest provocation. You skipped tonight’s sunset devotions without a thought of—”

“You’re the paladin, Dasmara, not I.” He tried to walk away, but she grabbed his shoulder and made him face her.

“You’ve started taking pleasure in killing. You turned a blind eye to Lysander’s vile flute, and now you intend to ally with him—a walking corpse! These things aren’t like you, Alexi.”

“Maybe you don’t know me as well as you think you do.”

She gazed fiercely into his eyes. “The Alexi Shadowborn I know would never try to force himself on a woman.”

“Well, if you spot one around here, tell me.”

She looked at him as if he’d struck her. Then she shook her head in confusion, sadness clouding her features. “What has gotten into you, Alexi?”

With a final look of disgust, she strode away.



Alexi watched Dasmaria walk to her armor and don her breastplate. Was she protecting herself from the ghosts, or from him?

Once she was out of proximity, the fire in Alexi's veins subsided, leaving only the cold, empty void in his heart that had become all too familiar. He could think more clearly again, see more clearly again.

And when he looked inside, he did not like what he saw.

What had gotten into him, indeed? Whatever this icy darkness was inside him, it was growing. And the larger it grew, the more it affected his actions. It clouded his judgment. It set his nerves on edge.

It was taking control.

What had begun as brief bursts of temper had progressed to unforgivable conduct toward his closest friend. He shuddered as he thought of what he had said to her, what he had done. The memory filled him with shame.

"Das, I'm sorry," he whispered into the night.

The dark force in his heart scared him. How could he fight it if he didn't know what it was? Yet some small part of him did know, though he scarcely dared admit the truth even to himself: Evil itself had gained a foothold within him. The knowledge chilled him to the marrow. As the High Mother had told him on the day of the Darkening, evil seldom released its grip on a man's heart.

But fight it he would, with every breath he took. Perhaps a victory tomorrow at Forenoon Abbey would break its hold over him. Or perhaps, he thought as despair swept through him, fighting so many ghouls would forever seal his fate.

His gaze again settled on Dasmaria. She sat alone, apparently lost in thought—thoughts, no doubt, about how horribly he had just treated her. Even if he managed to exorcise the evil from his heart, had he destroyed any chance of happiness with her? Was there a friendship left to salvage? He prayed to Belenus that there was.

So ashamed that he could barely hold his head up, he approached her to apologize. She didn't look up when he reached her side.

"Das?"

She kept her face impassive and her gaze fixed solidly on the ground. "Alexi, please leave me alone," she said quietly. "I can't speak to you right now."

He couldn't tell whether she was furious, disgusted, or deeply hurt. A wave of regret and sorrow washed over him for making her feel any of those things. "Das, I'm—"

"Not now. Maybe tomorrow, but not now."

As much as he wanted to beg her forgiveness, he remained silent. He would respect her request, as he wished to Belenus he had done earlier. He left her and went to sit beside Lysander.

"If it is any consolation to you," said the old man, "Dasmaria is not speaking to me either." Sighing deeply, Lysander gazed into the woods surrounding them. "I believe it is Ebonbane's influence. He seeks to conquer us by dividing us."



They passed the night in safety if not in peace. Through the long hours of darkness, as the grim face of the moon drifted slowly through the heavens, the howls of the damned filled the air. Their moans seemed to echo the despair in Alexi's own heart.

He got little sleep. Throughout his shift of guard duty, a litany of concerns occupied his thoughts: how to apologize to Dasmaria, how to rescue his brother from the ghouls, how to battle the growing evil within him. After he woke Lysander and bedded down, the same thoughts kept him awake long into the pilgrim's shift. And once he finally drifted off, he awoke twice with the sensation that he was being watched by one of the ghosts in the woods. When he opened his eyes, however, only the dim glow of Lysander's magical light greeted him.

The din of the tortured spirits ceased just before dawn. As the Eye of Belenus peeked over the horizon, the trio broke camp hurriedly. Once more Alexi tried to apologize to Dasmaria, but the firm set of her jaw was more than enough to discourage the attempt.

They rode mostly in uncomfortable silence. The terrain proved only slightly less difficult to negotiate in the daylight than it had been at night. The bramble-covered road buckled with protruding tree roots as it twisted along.

About the time the sun reached its zenith, they arrived at a clearing in the forest. Dasmaria drew rein and, slipped off her horse. She stretched the kinks out her muscles, a fluid process that reminded Alexi of a cat getting up from a nap in the sun. "We need to take a break," she said tersely. "My muscles are knotted, and I think we could all use something to eat."

"Fifteen minutes," said Lysander, "no more."

Both of the warriors turned to look at the old man. He had spoken with a tone of authority, one he had probably cultivated during his service in the Heretical Wars.

"Forgive me," he said when he saw their eyes upon him. "I simply mean that we must press on if we are to arrive at the abbey before sundown. At our current pace, we will cut it close, and I, for one, would prefer to encounter the ghouls during their vulnerable daylight hours. If we must wait until morning and spend another night in this forest, we will be at the mercy of the spirits, and I daresay their mercy would be a precious commodity indeed."

"You're right," said Dasmaria. It took Alexi several seconds to realize that Dasmaria had not only spoken to Lysander, but she had also agreed with him. If she was beginning to soften toward their unliving companion, perhaps before long she would be ready to hear Alexi's apology.

They spent a few minutes moving around and working muscles that had been too long dormant. After stretching, they each took a handful of dried rations, returned to the leather saddles, and started on the road again.

For Alexi, the ride seemed to last forever. Dasmaria's anger, though well deserved, distressed him almost as much as the constant iciness that sat like a glacier in his chest. But of even greater concern was the knowledge that his brother waited at the end of this twisting road—a brother he had no idea whether he would be rescuing or burying. Or whether there would be anything left of Ferran to bury.

At last the dark silhouette of Forenoon Abbey rose against the waning colors of the sky. The monastery showed little sign of occupation. A few sections of the walls had crumbled, but the structure otherwise appeared intact, with two exceptions—both apparently signs that some evil presence now resided in this once holy temple.

The first alteration could have been wrought by nothing more than repeated storms and the passing of years, although Alexi suspected otherwise. Every single stained-glass window that had adorned the stout brick walls was broken. Shards of glass, like rows of fangs lining the inside of stone maws, glittered in the dying light of the day.

The second indication, however, was more obviously the result of blasphemous intent. High

atop the monastery's bell tower, where Alexi knew the solar disk of Belenus should have gleamed, there was nothing. If any part of the abbey had been built to weather storm and disaster, it was that golden pinnacle. It had not fallen under the weight of the years—it had been pulled down. And Alexi knew what manner of creature had done it.

Lysander called a halt. "The ghouls are still there," he said with disgust. "I can feel their presence."

"And Ferran?" Alexi asked.

"I cannot tell," replied the pilgrim. "The ghouls were once my spiritual brothers, but I have no special rapport with Ferran. There is, of course, no obvious sign of his presence."

Already dusky shadows enveloped the abbey. "We have arrived later than I had planned," said the pilgrim. "We should move quickly if we hope to find Ferran before the sun sets."

They kicked their horses into motion to close the remaining distance, but in this gloomy land under Ebonbane's power, the sun left the sky faster than it did in the Great Kingdom. Just as they reached the stone walls, the Eye of Belenus dipped below the horizon.

They dismounted and prepared to enter the abbey. In that instant, however, a dark shape sprang from the brush. A dozen others followed, surging out of the darkness from all sides. Ghouls—all of them bearing the hideous death's-head tattoo on their foreheads.

As the night stalkers charged, Pitch reared up and let out an alarmed whinny. He kicked out with his powerful forelegs and crushed the forehead of a ghoul. Where his fierce hooves had struck the undead creature, leather flesh tore away and blackened ooze seeped out. Splinters of bone tore through the membrane around the wound, showing clearly that the skull had splintered. The ghoul toppled backward, crashed to the ground, and lay still.

Alexi brought Corona flashing out of its scabbard, impaling one of the slaving ghouls almost immediately. But even as he pulled his sword out of the creature and kicked its dying body aside, another appeared to menace him. A step to one side and a lateral sweep of gleaming steel felled the vile beast.

Not far from where the body of the second ghoul had fallen, Alexi saw Lysander raise his arms high over his head. In the ancient language of the scriptures, he called upon the power of Brigit through prayers unknown to Alexi's ears. With a final cry of fervor, he snapped his right arm down and swept the left one forward to point at a trio of looming ghouls. Speaking the name of his goddess, the pilgrim closed his hand into a fist. A jet of flame sprang forth.

The flame grew to a length of some three feet until it looked like the blade of a sword. Lysander drove forward, sweeping his blazing weapon from side to side. With each blow, a ghoul fell backward and cried out in pain. A second blow invariably slew the wounded creature. Lysander fought with such fury that his cowl slid off. One of the ghouls, trying to claw him from behind, tore the heavy fabric with its steel-sharp talons. The hood slipped to the ground, forgotten.

Two more creatures pounced on Alexi. He kicked one away as he hacked off the arm of the other. The injured ghoul cried out, black ooze gushing from the wound. With another blow, Alexi put the beast out of its misery, then set to work on its fellow. The second ghoul proved more dexterous than the first, dodging three of Alexi's passes before finally falling to the fourth.

From the corner of his eye, Alexi saw Dasmara drive into a mass of ghouls—no fewer than half a dozen—and set to work with her golden sword. The dancing blade looked as much like lightning as cold steel in the hands of its skilled wielder. Two ghouls fell before they even knew they were under attack. A third raised his talons to strike, only to find a sword buried in its chest. Its mouth fell open, and a howl of agony split the night.

The fourth ghoul, forced to dodge around the falling body of its companion, found itself suddenly facing Dasmara's unprotected back. Its talons lashed out, ripping through leather

leggings and the flesh beneath.

Dasmaria cried out. Alexi tried to get to her, but another ghoul charged forward, blocking his way. As he cleaved the beast in half, he saw Dasmaria over its shoulder. She tried to shift the weight from her wounded leg but was forced to lean away from another attacker. The injured limb buckled and she fell.

“Das!” he shouted. An instant later, she was buried under the clawing bodies of a dozen ghouls. Alexi felt his blood run cold as he saw the faces and hands of the terrible creatures smeared with red. Unnaturally long tongues ran over jagged teeth, and Alexi felt the urge to vomit.

But he had no time to mourn. With one of their prey down, the ghouls were emboldened. They drove forward like a surging tide, apparently assured of their success.

Four more ghouls surrounded Alexi. As he thrust at the closest one, he knew he and Lysander needed a new strategy before they, too, were overwhelmed. Then, in a flash, the answer came to him.

“Karnas, radamar!”

As the warm rays of Belenus spilled forth from Corona, Alexi felt nothing but despair. Why—why hadn’t he thought to invoke the sword’s power sooner? In the heat of battle, he had fallen back on his old battle tactics, the ones ingrained in him from countless skirmishes and hours of training with an ordinary weapon. Too late, he had recalled the magic at his command.

Too late for Dasmaria, but not for the rest of them. The unexpected flash of radiance took the ghouls unawares. One of the creatures was caught in midleap by the sudden flare of bright light. A lance of radiance pierced its chest, burning the monster like kindling in a hearth. Cries of pain tore into the night as the unholy creatures felt the sting of purity.

The screams were music to Alexi’s ears. “Die, you filthy beasts!” he shouted. The chill in his heart swelled, sending a surge of ice water coursing through his veins. Darkness filled his body and soul.

He looked around, reveling in the spectacle before him. He would have his revenge on the foul creatures who had taken first his brother, then Dasmaria. But as he gazed with twisted pleasure on the agony around him, a horrible sight met his eyes.

Lysander was down, clutching at his head in a futile attempt to shield it from Corona’s burning aura. Alexi realized that during previous battles, the ancient man had been careful to keep his back to the scintillating blade. How, without his shielding hood, the light was as deadly to him as it was to the undead attackers. In seconds, the pilgrim would be dust.

As the three war-horses fought on, hammering away at those ghouls who were not instantly slain by the holy light, Alexi rushed toward Lysander. Midway, he commanded Corona into darkness. At once the night descended again. Alexi knelt at the old man’s side.

“Lysander! Can you hear me?”

“I... hear,” whispered the pilgrim. Agony tainted his words, forcing him to speak through clenched teeth. His eyes were tightly shut and his body trembled. “Rekindle the flame!”

“I cannot,” said Alexi. “You’ll be destroyed!”

“You must,” ordered Lysander, “or we will be overrun!”

Alexi knew Lysander was right. The woods around them were alive with dark shapes flitting through the moonlight. Here and there, a pale red eye flashed in the undergrowth and a slaving hiss broke the air. No matter what the cost, he must light the holy blade and drive this ravenous enemy back.

Alexi stood and raised the gleaming blade aloft. A cold wind rose from nowhere and blew past him, carrying on it the stench of rotting corpses and the fetid breath of the cannibals surrounding him. *“Karnas—”*

Before he could complete the holy command, a ghoul crashed down upon his back. He fell forward, the obscene creature raking its talons down both his cheeks. The force of the impact drove the air from his lungs and loosened his grip on Corona. When he tried to draw in his breath, he found the creature's stink overwhelming.

More ghouls raced forward and pressed his face into the damp soil. Foul talons clutched at his arms, and he was jerked hard around. Corona spun out of his fingers and landed with a thump on the earth. The sky was gone, blotted out by the horrible faces of things long dead.

But he did not lose hope. As one of the ghouls licked at the trickles of blood that ran down his cheek, Alexi called once more to his blade.

But no sounds issued from his mouth.

He tried to scream but could not. The toxin of the ghouls' claws had paralyzed him once more. It was all he could do to breathe. He had no way to save himself.

Or Lysander.

Or Ferran.



The knight has fallen.

My minions, pathetic though they are, have proven too much for him. He has been taken by the ghouls and is even now being carried into the ruined monastery. The Ghoul Lord hungers for his flesh, but Alexi Shadowborn is not his. It angers him, but that is of no importance to me. They have feasted upon the corpse of the paladin, but the others are mine—the knight, the boy, and the traitor. Their demises will be more terrible than even the Ghoul Lord can imagine.

The knight's despair is delightfully tactile.

I can feel it radiate from him. He does not know whether his brother still lives or not. He has hurt the woman he loves and seen her destroyed by the most pitiful of my underlings. He has learned that the man who travels with him is no more living than the creatures who have defeated him. By the time he is brought before me, his spirit will be broken. And with his ultimate defeat, Kateri Shadowborn's spirit will also break.

But there is something more.

His mind is not on the death of his companion, the fate of his brother, or even the almost certain doom that awaits him. No, he is wracked with images drawn from the minds of those who fell before him in combat. He feels their pain and relives the sensations that surrounded their destruction.

He has discovered the seed of darkness within him.

He struggles with it, yet he does not understand it. Little does he know that if he did, his power would be greatly magnified. But he denies the darkness instead of embracing the power it promises him.

Is he that foolish?

I do not think so. I believe that he must know in his heart what the truth is, where this power comes from. And yet he lacks the many senses that are mine to command. I have overestimated him. His intelligence is but a fraction of my own; his perceptions are dim at best. He does not know the truth.

But that is a situation I can remedy.

I reach out. A touch of my power, and the darkness stirs. It is exactly as I expected. While the warrior still suffers the agony of those he so recently slew, I have given the shadows that torment him a power they have not had before. It will be most amusing to watch the young warrior torn apart by that which abides within him.

I think I shall keep this from Kateri Shadowborn for now.



Ferran was alive.

It was more than Alexi had reason to hope.

Indeed, he considered the fact that the ghouls had not devoured either Lysander or himself something of a wonder. That the three of them were now prisoners in the bottom of a deep, black pit seemed secondary. To find that their efforts had not been in vain was an incredible stroke of good fortune.

And the fact that Dasmaria had fallen was an unthinkable nightmare.

She had died as she had lived: bravely, honorably, and fighting for the cause of righteousness. As a warrior, she had been prepared for such a fate. Yet that knowledge could not assuage Alexi's grief. Not only had he lost a friend, but the Circle had lost a paladin who had only just begun her career as a champion of the cause of right. What she might have accomplished, the world would now never know.

That their last words had been spoken in anger, he could not bear to contemplate. He would carry that burden with him to his own grave.

But Alexi knew he must force these thoughts from his mind and concentrate on the situation at hand. If he allowed grief and guilt to overwhelm him, Dasmaria's death would have been for naught. He would grieve later, when this dreadful quest was concluded—if he were still alive to do so.

He turned his attention to Ferran, once again the recipient of Lysander's curative arts. Alexi could see the boy only by the pale light of several phosphorescent lichen patches.

"How is he?" he asked Lysander.

"Your brother has been badly used." Lysander lifted his eyes from Ferran's dirty, battered body. "I have exhausted my healing spells, and still he is not fully revived. He will wake soon, but it will be some time before he is truly himself again."

Assuming the ghouls didn't kill them all in the very near future. Alexi tried to battle the despair seeping into his heart. If nothing else, he would have the chance to say a last farewell to his beloved younger brother.

"How are you faring?" asked Lysander, rising slowly to his feet.

"As well as might be expected." It was true enough, he supposed. His body had thrown off the paralytic effects of the ghoul poisons. He could move freely again, if somewhat stiffly, although the lacerations on his face would take a long time to heal. And even when they did, he would likely wear terrible scars for the rest of his days. Even magical healing could not fully erase such evil wounds.

"What about you?" Alexi asked.

"I am well enough, though I will not soon forget the sting of Corona's fire. The greatest trial of my curse is that I may no longer allow the holy light of day to fall upon my pale skin."

"Alexi?" came a faint voice from the other side of the pit. It was the first sound Ferran had made since he and Lysander were tossed in here. Alexi hastened to the boy's side and took his brother's hand. He adjusted the bundle of clothing they had placed behind Ferran's head to make the boy more comfortable.

"Lie still," Alexi said softly.

"Where... where are we?" asked Ferran. "How did you get me away from... from..."

Alexi pressed a finger to his brother's lips. Poor Ferrari had been so traumatized by their captors that he couldn't bring himself to identify them. Alexi had nearly as much difficulty saying what he had to.

"We haven't gotten you away, Ferran." Alexi stroked a lock of the boy's matted hair away from his eyes. "Lysander and I have been taken as well."

At the mention of the pilgrim, Ferran rolled his eyes to gaze upon Lysander. He stood several feet away, almost completely cloaked in shadows. As he stepped forward, the boy saw his face and cried out in terror.

"Forgive me," gasped the pilgrim. He threw the new, makeshift hood he had constructed over his head to shield his disturbing countenance from the boy. "I lowered my cowl to pray. I forgot to replace it."

Alexi motioned for Lysander to be silent. As the monk fell back into the darkness, Alexi clutched Ferran to him. The boy trembled and shook as sobs of fear and loathing wracked his body. Though Lysander could heal his brother's physical wounds, the mental scars would fade only with the passage of time. Whatever the ghouls had done to his brother, Alexi vowed, they and their master would pay. Somehow, before this was all over, justice would be served.

It was several minutes before his soothing words calmed Ferran. When at last the boy fell still, Alexi lowered him back to the floor and tried to explain all that had happened since the battle in the swamp. He began with the closing seconds of the skirmish in which Ferran was taken and the flight afterward. He recounted the happenings in the Phantasmal Forest and, much as it pained him to do so, told the gruesome tale of Dasmara's death. The weakened boy listened, though he seemed barely able to remain conscious.

"Alexi," said Ferran, "they tried... to turn me against you... . They told me things... I remember the pain... I tried not to listen..."

Alexi held his brother tightly. Ferran's eyes had gone wide with fear, and sweat beaded on his forehead. Gradually, as Alexi rocked him gently in his arms, the boy's eyes closed. Except for shallow, anxious breathing, he lay still.

"He's asleep," said Alexi.

"Perhaps that's best," said Lysander.

Alexi nodded. But from the trembling spasms that soon shook the squire's body, he knew Ferran's slumber was not a peaceful one. The knight could only imagine what terrors filled his brother's dreams. Knowing how the depths of his own soul were haunted by dark shapes and phantasmal ghouls, perhaps he did not have to imagine at all.

Alexi rose and turned toward Lysander. The monk had moved to the far side of the pit and knelt. His whispered prayers echoed shallowly in the darkness. Lysander was reciting the predawn prayers with which the followers of Brigit bade farewell to their goddess.

Alexi had no idea what time of day it was. Was Lysander guessing, or did the dead have some innate ability to sense the rising and setting of the sun? Considering its fatal effect upon them, the idea might not be too farfetched.

He knelt beside the monk and bowed his head. Drawing in a deep breath, he joined his voice to the pilgrim's. Though it was not a prayer that Alexi was thoroughly familiar with, the words of faith chased away some of the darkness within him.

After the devotions, Lysander placed his hand on Alexi's shoulder. "You should get some rest," he said. "It is certainly after sunrise now, and I doubt the ghouls will return to deal with us until after sunset."

Alexi nodded. "What about you?"

"The pleasure of sleep is denied me," he said, "though I made a pretense of it on our journey to disguise my true nature as long as possible. Still, I shall make good use of the next few hours."

Through contemplation, prayer, and meditation, I will refresh my spellcasting abilities. If the blessed Brigit permits me, I may be able to further heal Ferran before the ghouls return. Perhaps we can give my former brothers a surprise or two.”

Alexi nodded and stretched out beside his brother. He remembered nights—nights that seemed not so long ago—when Ferran had begged to sleep in his older brother’s room. Once in a while Alexi had granted his younger sibling permission to do so. On those evenings, they had shared stories, secrets, and dreams. It was little wonder that as Ferran grew older, he had elected to follow in his older brother’s footsteps when it came time to choose a career.

Though Alexi tried get comfortable, he was as tired and sore as he had ever been in his life. Every muscle seemed to complain even when not called upon to do anything. And when he did move, the residual toxins of his ghoul attackers made every gesture awkward. He closed his eyes with a shallow sigh.

And before long, ghouls surrounded him.

He cried out, grabbing for his sword and biting off a curse when he realized that he no longer had his weapon. The creatures leered at him, their horrific faces illuminated by the pale glow of lichen as they circled. Had he been armed, Alexi would have said that they were looking for a chance to strike. The truth of the matter, however, was that they were toying with him.

When he looked for Lysander and Ferran, his heart jerked to a stop.

Both of his companions had risen and stood with the ranks of the undead. Lysander was uncowed, his eyes burning like fiery coals. In his gaunt hands, he clutched the grip of his deadly mace. Like his eyes, the pilgrim’s weapon now seemed to be wreathed in a ruddy glow.

Far more terrible than this, however, was the sight of Ferran. His brother was not as he had appeared a few minutes before. Instead, he had become every bit as gaunt and skeletal as Lysander. And in his hands, the squire held a bright silver blade: Corona.

Alexi knew that to wait for the coming attack was to invite death. Setting his jaw firmly, he lunged forward and threw his shoulder at Ferran. If he could get his hands on Corona, the tide of battle would turn. It wouldn’t matter how many of the revolting creatures opposed him; the warrior could at least hold his own.

Ferran must have expected the attack, however. Just before Alexi reached him, the restless corpse of his brother slipped nimbly aside. The knight crashed to the stone floor, gasping for breath. He rolled over and saw the ranks of the undead looming over him.

“Alexi Shadowborn,” called Lysander. “The time has come!”

He cried out.

And then his eyes flew open. He was awake again.

Alexi sat up, trying to catch his breath. The nightmares were growing stronger and more vivid. The familiar pain in his chest had returned, more terrible and icy than ever. With it, he could almost hear mocking laughter inside him.

The coldness began to spread. He shut his eyes tightly, imagining a small box inside his chest, surrounding the malevolent presence. With every ounce of will he could muster, he concentrated on trapping the coldness within the cell. He had to contain it, had to keep it from overwhelming him.

When he felt he had the force under control, he opened his eyes once more. He heard no sound of the ghouls returning yet, but the moment could not be long in coming. And he could imagine only too easily what the creatures had in store for their three captives.

He rubbed his eyes. His mouth tasted worse than the fetid air in the pit smelled, and his joints had grown even more stiff during his fitful nap. “How’s Ferran?” he asked Lysander.

“I think he’ll pull through,” said a soft, youthful voice.

Relief washed over Alexi as he saw his younger brother standing beside the monk. He rose hurriedly and swept Ferran up in a powerful embrace.

"Be careful with him," said Lysander. "I've only just gotten his ribs to knit. If you crack one, you'll have to heal it."

Alexi lowered his brother gingerly, as if the boy were a delicate porcelain figure that must be treated with extreme care. He prayed to Belenus that, whatever horrible fate might befall himself, somehow his brother would escape to safety. No sooner had he finished the silent supplication than scraping sounds above heralded the approach of their captors.

"Have you got a plan?" Ferran asked.

"I'm sure I do," Alexi said grimly. "I just haven't thought of it yet."

With a sudden crash of steel on stone, their jailers threw aside the metal grate covering the top of the pit. At almost the same instant, a wooden ladder was jabbed down, narrowly missing Alexi's head. The trio looked at each other in silence. Finally the knight, after glancing once more at Ferrari, stepped in front of his companions.

Alexi put his foot on the ladder and started upward. The wood was old, and each rung bowed under his weight. When he neared the top, clawed hands seized him and tossed him roughly aside to clear the ladder for Ferran and Lysander.

A dozen ghoulish guards led the three companions away from the pit and through a series of dark corridors. Every so often one of the creatures would poke at the captives in the same way farmers herded their cattle to the slaughterhouse.

Looking about him, the knight surmised that this level had once held a wine cellar. As they stumbled through the darkness, he caught faint impressions of row upon row of racks, all filled with dusty bottles. If it hadn't all gone to vinegar, he imagined one could find some Vintner's prizes here. From the smell of rotting meat that filled the area, Alexi dared not guess what the ghouls used the rooms for now.

Twice during the transit, Alexi attempted to speak. Each time, however, he got no further than the first word before a hissing voice ordered him to be silent. The second time, a sharp talon threatened his throat. After that, no one dared make a sound.

Alexi used the time to take a good look at his captors. While he hated the sight of these vile creatures, there was something riveting about them. From the speed with which they moved and the sinister fire in their eyes, it was hard to believe they were not alive. Still, their pallor and the leathery texture of their flesh spoke of nothing but the grave.

And then there was the stench.

Alexi had ridden through battlefields where a hundred bodies lay rotting in the sun. Even that rank odor had been nothing compared to the stink of these creatures. He observed, however, that Lysander and Ferran did not appear bothered by the smell. At first this worried Alexi, but then he realized that Ferran must have grown used to the smell during his captivity, and Lysander, one of the walking dead himself, probably didn't even notice it.

The group abruptly came to a broad flight of stone stairs. The steps rose no more than five feet to a pair of wide cathedral doors. Torches burned unevenly in sconces at the top, throwing rippling shadows around the darkened hall. Two of the ghouls moved ahead of the others, ascending the steps and pushing open the great portal. Before he could get a clear look through the opening, Alexi was grabbed, dragged up the steps, and thrust through the door.

Stumbling, he managed not to fall. The less agile Lysander crashed to the floor beside him. Alexi moved to help his friend up, but a sharp blow to his back stopped him in his tracks. He sank down on one knee, flashes of light obscuring his vision, but he refused to fall. By the time his eyesight cleared, Alexi saw that Lysander had gotten back to his feet.

When the three captives had been led away from the pit, Alexi hadn't understood why the

ghouls hadn't bound them in some fashion. However, as they were prodded forward, the reason became clear to him.

The room before Alexi and his comrades, the monastery's minster, crawled with ghouls. Even unbound, who could hope to escape such an unholy host?

Like all churches sacred to Belenus, this minster was a vast chamber capped by a gilded dome set atop stout stone walls. Openings in the wall showed where a dozen stained-glass windows had once celebrated the hours of the day. Shards of colored glass still hung in the window frames, all that remained of those traditional decorations. Like the temple back in Avonleigh, this cathedral featured concentric rings of pews, all facing the central altar.

Based on Lysander's estimation of the number of monks cloistered here when Ebonbane defiled the abbey, Alexi had expected to find perhaps twoscore ghouls hiding in the monastery. However, more than thrice that number now waited in the minster. Clearly the ghoul population had increased. Perhaps this was a reflection of the growing power of their master, Ebonbane. The fiend had grown stronger through the years, managing to defeat the woman who had once driven him from the world. Apparently he had continued to amass power and influence after her demise.

The creatures formed a great mass of dark bodies pressed one upon another until Alexi had difficulty distinguishing where one ended and the next began. In the flickering, uneven light of the half-dozen torches scattered around the minster, their eyes glowed yellow and green. He felt as if he were being cast into a chamber filled with gluttonous rats.

All of the ghouls shared the crimson death's-head mark on their foreheads that Alexi had first seen in the Brimstadt graveyard back in Avonleigh—the night his nightmares had started. Had Ebonbane sent his minions there? Did he seek to expand his domain to encompass all the people and places Kateri Shadowborn had ever held dear?

Alexi wished he had Corona. With the radiance of the holy blade, he could sweep this host of evil out of existence in a second, instantly incinerating them all with the fire of Belenus.

But he had lost his blade outside the abbey when they were taken. What would become of it now, he could not imagine. He took some consolation in the fact that it was a holy weapon. Even if he could not wield it against the ghouls, they would at least be unable to turn its power upon him.

Musings about his sword evaporated as he saw Ferran trembling. Alexi wished he could comfort his brother. From all appearances, Ferran had almost certainly endured his torture here in this defiled chamber. No doubt the same fate now awaited him as well.

As the trio neared the center of the room, the mass of undead parted to reveal a crude throne set upon the dais. A thick shadow hung over the area, preventing Alexi from seeing who or what rested upon that seat. Two glaring yellow-green eyes stared out from the darkness, watching the three companions with a predatory hunger.

When Alexi reached the edge of the dais, a pair of taloned hands grabbed his arm. He halted no more than a dozen feet from the dark throne and the mysterious master of this place. A pair of torches were brought forward and secured to the side of the throne. In their dancing amber light, Alexi saw a creature more revolting even than the ghouls.

It leaned forward in the throne, much as a scholar might while considering a tricky problem. Although the thing could once have been human, it had now become the embodiment of the grave. Gaunt and skeletal, its flesh was a sickly gray, with mottled patches of green and black. The eyes had sunken deep into their sockets beneath the few wisps of white hair that managed to cling to this long-dead thing.

A crimson death's-head adorned its forehead. But unlike the tattoos the other ghouls displayed, this mark appeared to have been branded with an iron of supernaturally intense heat. The skull

icon was seared into the creature's withered flesh, its edges still black.

At the sight, the iciness in Alexi's chest surged. He struggled to contain it, forcing it back into the imaginary cell he had fashioned with his will.

"I am the master of this place," proclaimed the obscene creature. He hissed out the words between stiletto teeth, punctuating them with a slender, rasplike tongue that tasted the air like a serpent's.

Alexi said nothing, although he suspected that some response was expected of him. After a few seconds of defiant silence, a blow to the back of his head knocked him to his knees. He dragged himself to his feet, blinking to chase away the spots in his vision.

When his vision cleared, he locked his eyes with those of the creature and resumed his impertinent silence. He expected to be struck again, but this time the vile thing on the throne raised a hand to halt the ghoulish guard.

"So you are Alexi Shadowborn." The leering creature rose to its feet and stepped toward Alexi. Its gangly limbs looked weak and frail, but based on his experience with the other ghouls, Alexi suspected otherwise. He tilted his head to the side, assessing the knight with a curious eye. "Long ago I had a name as well. I left it behind with the frailty of life. Now I am known simply as the Ghoul Lord."

Alexi tensed as the self-proclaimed Ghoul Lord stepped forward and peered into Ferran's eyes. The squire cringed but held his ground. Alexi took pride in his brother's bravery; the boy had been through much, yet still managed to present a show of courage.

The Ghoul Lord's leathery fingers reached out. A single talon slid down Ferran's cheek. It did not break the skin, but left a white scratch behind.

"You are looking well, young man," said the creature. "I appear to have underestimated your stamina."

The Ghoul Lord's head once more tilted to the side, this time fixing Lysander with his predatory gaze. The edges of his mouth turned up in what Alexi assumed was a smile, although it looked more like the baring of a jackal's teeth.

"Or perhaps," he said slowly, "it is our brother whose power I neglected to consider. Is this the case, Lysander? Have you still some measure of your clerical ability? Does your precious moon goddess still grant her pitiful blessings to her dead follower?"

Ferran turned his head to cast a wary gaze at Lysander. Apparently the boy was still uncomfortable with the thought that he had been traveling in the company of an undead creature. Alexi couldn't guess how much of that trepidation was simply normal human reaction and how much was a product of his recent torment at the hands of the ghouls.

"You are no brother of mine," said Lysander calmly. "Your master is a creature of darkness and evil. I and my companions serve the powers of light. Their might is something that your kind cannot understand."

"I see that your years in the grave have not taught you respect for Ebonbane. Perhaps the time has come for you to return there."

At that, a pair of ghouls moved forward to grab Lysander's arms. Reflexes took over, and Alexi moved to aid his companion. Before he had taken a step, however, another brace of the revolting creatures grabbed the knight and held him in their iron grip. While Alexi struggled to break free, Lysander was forced to his knees.

The Ghoul Lord began to draw a dark-bladed scimitar from a scabbard he wore, but then halted. For a second, eight inches of razor-edged blade shone in the uneven torchlight before he drove the weapon back into its scabbard. Again the revolting mockery of a smile played over his face.

"I believe it will be the hand of Alexi Shadowborn that ends your life," the Ghoul Lord said

smugly. Then, in a loud voice, he called out a single word.

“Vapir!”

Again Alexi tried to break free, but the ghouls who held him remained as strong as ever. He looked to his brother. From the terrified expression on Ferran’s pale face, the boy apparently knew what was coming.

Seconds later, the sea of ghouls parted to allow a slender woman to advance. From a distance, she resembled in some ways Lady Victoria. She stood nearly as tall as Alexi, with long, slender limbs and hair like a sleek, flowing cascade of gold. She moved with the grace and elegance of a natural athlete. But the similarity ended there.

At first Alexi thought the Vapir was a living woman. As she came closer, however, her skin appeared pale, almost translucent. Beneath it, he could see her muscles, tissues, and veins pulsing with sickening rhythm. With every step, she became more horrible to behold. If he had been asked to choose, Alexi would have been hard pressed to say which creature revolted him more: the Ghoul Lord or the Vapir.

She slid through the shadows and torchlight with the rolling stride of a harlot. Without a word, she moved to the Ghoul Lord’s empty throne and draped herself over it. Seated, she looked down at Alexi and his companions with a sultry fire in her eyes, assuming a pose that might have appeared seductive in a living woman. In this creature, however, it turned Alexi’s stomach.

But Alexi’s disgust transformed to fear when he looked at Ferran. His brother seemed on the verge of collapse. All traces of color had drained from his face, and perspiration ran freely down his brow. There could be no doubt that this creature was responsible for his torture. Despite her frail appearance, there must be more to this unearthly woman than met Alexi’s eye. He swallowed hard and tried to steel himself for whatever might happen next.

“My dear,” said the Ghoul Lord, “the time has come for our friend Lysander to die... again.”

At these words, a cruel smile crossed the Vapir’s face. Alexi couldn’t help but think of her as a deadly spider about to savor the taste of her helpless prey.

“It is my desire that Alexi Shadowborn see to this matter,” hissed the Ghoul Lord. Slurping, jeering laughter rippled through the assembled undead. Anything that so amused his captors, Alexi knew, could not bode well for him.

In the next instant, the Vapir’s mind slammed into his own, hammering his will. The assault was as unexpected as it was terrible. The knight clutched at the sides of his head. The spasms of pain that wracked his body granted him strength enough to break the grip of the ghouls, but left him helpless to take advantage of his freedom. He fell to his knees as wave after wave of vile images flooded his mind.

He saw in an instant all the dark deeds this woman had done, both before and after her death. In many ways, the impressions were like those that he received after running a ghoul through with his holy sword. But there was something more terrible about these visions: they were relished and treasured.

He saw lovers slain in blissful sleep.

He saw innocents cut down like wheat before the farmer’s merciless scythe.

He saw children put to the sword while their helpless mothers watched.

The horrible mosaic threatened to overwhelm his spirit. An ordinary man could not have resisted the power of the monster’s mind, or even have survived the initial assault. But this was not the first time that Alexi had seen such things. His own mind was so frequently assailed by dark and evil visions that he was able to steel himself against the worst of their effects.

The barrage worsened. Alexi tried to block out the ugly images by focusing his thoughts. He was a knight, he told himself, very nearly a paladin. He believed in the innate superiority of good over evil, light over darkness, truth over deception. As the impressions and thoughts of darkness

bombarded him, he called upon the only defense the ghouls had not been able to strip from him: his faith. While the onslaught of evil threatened to overwhelm him, he prayed to Belenus to bolster his resolve and fortify his spirit.

The clash of good and evil seemed to go on within him for hours, but Alexi knew that only a few minutes had passed. At first he merely held his own. But then, as his prayer and willpower rallied, he began to drive back the profane images. With words of salvation on his lips, he forced the Vapir to withdraw her violating presence from his mind.

Alexi gasped for breath. Heaving and shaking, he drew in lungful after lungful of foul air. His senses seemed to be failing him, growing fainter with every passing second as his heart struggled to beat out a frantic pace within his breast. He had fallen forward during the onslaught. Although still on his knees, his weight now rested on his hands.

Worse, the pain in his chest had returned. The mental effort required to keep the Vapir at bay had exhausted his willpower. The imaginary cell within him splintered, allowing the malevolent presence to seep out like ice water. He fought to maintain control, to force the darkness back into its cell and hold it there.

For a moment, the whole of the temple fell dark and silent. The Vapir lay upon the throne, her eyes wide and face drained. She gazed with surprise at the knight.

"You are an impressive man, Alexi Shadowborn," hissed the Ghoul Lord. "Never before have I seen a mortal fend off the advances of the Vapir. Either her powers are weakening or your faith is strong."

"I daresay," remarked the Vapir languidly, "that the knight might even be strong enough to resist the will of our master." Clearly shaken by her efforts, she made every effort to appear unruffled. Loose tendrils of hair had fallen forward over her eyes, and she swept them back with fluid strokes.

"Indeed," said the Ghoul Lord with a sinister laugh, "it is fortunate that the traitor Lysander is not so powerful. He has done the master's bidding before and will be more easily controlled. I will not be cheated of my amusements." At that, he nodded at the Vapir, and she allowed a cruel smile to paint the edges of her thin, translucent lips.

Alexi gathered enough strength to lift his head. Still barely able to breathe, he saw Lysander's head snap back suddenly. For the faintest fraction of a second, the monk struggled to throw off the will of the Vapir. The pilgrim's eyes opened wide and his jaw clenched in pain. Then the emaciated body sagged. Lysander's resistance had been overwhelmed. Despair filled Alexi's heart at the thought of the tortured man being once more in the grip of evil.

"It is done," said the Vapir. "He is mine."

She flipped her wrist, as if breaking the pilgrim's spirit were a thing easily done. Her eyes had taken on a red glow with the delight of domination. She ran a translucent tongue along bone-white lips in a sultry gesture that made Alexi want to vomit. "I can control the child as well," she said with a sadistic grin.

The Ghoul Lord laughed slowly. He nodded, and the Vapir languidly stretched out her slender arm to point a skeletal finger at Ferran. The youth threw his arms out in a futile gesture of defiance, but with no other sign of resistance, Alexi saw his brother's eyes go blank. Like the Vapir's, they were now rimmed with red fire.

That was too much for Alexi.

The floodgates within him broke, allowing the cold waves he'd tried so hard to contain to crash over his heart and wash through him. He knew then, beyond a doubt, what the force was that had taken root inside him. It was anger. It was rage. It was hate.

Strength poured back into him. With a vengeance, the knight sprang forward. Before the ghouls could grab him, Alexi had thrown himself onto the Ghoul Lord. They crashed to the

ground. Alexi pinned the creature and skillfully withdrew the black scimitar at the Ghoul Lord's waist.

As the fell master of the monastery fixed him with a withering gaze, the knight brought the blade sweeping toward the Ghoul Lord's neck, intending to decapitate the beast with a single stroke.

Then everything went black.



Alexi snapped awake.

The foul odor of Forenoon Abbey, more effective than smelling salts, assailed his nostrils. Retching, he hung his head between his knees and spat twice before he realized that the effort did nothing to drive the vile taste from his mouth.

As the memory of where he was flooded over him, he fought back the nausea and raised his head. His eyes met a sight as blasphemous as it was horrifying.

While he'd been unconscious, apparently thwarted in his attack on the Ghoul Lord, the ghouls had all taken seats in the temple pews, as if preparing for a worship service. Their eyes burned like hot coals in the dim torchlight, like malevolent stars speckling a black night sky.

Alexi found himself seated in a front pew. On one side of him sat the wretched Ghoul Lord. His tongue flicked back and forth like the tail of a cat between needlelike teeth. On his other side sat the repugnant Vapir. She leaned close to Alexi, coiling her arms around him and periodically running her bony fingers along his cheeks. The touch of her cold flesh made him cringe.

Within him, the darkness the two denizens had unleashed still quaked. Though it had subsided to a whisper of its earlier roar, Alexi could yet feel the iciness chilling his heart. But now he welcomed its presence. He would marshal the rage, not try to subdue it. He would await his chance, then use it to destroy the foul creatures at his sides.

He turned his attention to the center of the profane spectacle before him. Upon the dais normally reserved for the priestess and her deacons, Ferran and Lysander waited. They stood back to back, upright and motionless, still apparently under the spell of the dreadful Vapir. The fact that she could dominate both of them while still managing to pay such unwanted attention to Alexi spoke volumes about the scope of her powers.

Each of them held a weapon. Lysander had wrapped his mummified fingers around the heavy golden mace that he had wielded during the battles in the mire and the Phantasmal Forest. It seemed to give off nearly as much light as the torches, though Alexi knew—or believed—the weapon did not hold magic.

Turning his attention to Ferran, Alexi gasped. His brother held Corona! Here at last, presented to him as if by the hand of Belenus himself, was the key to their salvation.

Alexi tried to spring to his feet, but slender, bone-white hands caught him at once and drove him back onto the hard wooden pew. He never would have believed the Vapir capable of such strength. He made a painful landing, but it did not stop him from calling out the words he had never expected to say again:

"Karnas, radamar!"

Nothing happened.

Alexi required several seconds to realize that his sword had failed him. No light sprang forth from the holy weapon to burn and destroy the undead.

His hope deflated. He remembered handing the glowing weapon to Dasmara in the Borderwood. The instant that her hand enfolded the grip, Corona's radiance had faltered. Until Alexi held the hilt, Corona could not respond to him.

"Disappointed?" the Vapir whispered. Her breath broke over him like a wave of stagnant water as she scraped her dry tongue along his ear. A shiver of revulsion passed down his spine. Alexi found the Vapir's overt sensuality more threatening than her attempts at mental domination. Her mere touch violated him. He tried to pull his face away from her, but found himself held tightly

against her abhorrent form.

Revulsion gave way to rancor as the darkness seethed within him. Somehow he would exact his revenge on the Vapir and her ghoulish consort. They would come to a violent end, and he would take pleasure in bringing them to it. With every pulse of his heart, icy rage traveled through him. He would bide his time. And then he would act.

"I think the time has come for our entertainment to commence," said the Ghoul Lord. He rose to his feet and waved an arm at Alexi's companions. "Which one of them will die first?"

At the resultant cheers from the crowd of ghouls, Lysander and Ferran spun to face each other. Both dropped into a defensive crouch and circled clockwise. Alexi wanted to look away, but he could not. No otherworldly power held his gaze on the combatants; he simply could not bear to tear his gaze from the macabre duel.

Ferran's combat training appeared only slightly diminished by the Vapir's mental domination. He hung back, waiting for Lysander to strike. When the monk's gleaming mace swept low in an attempt to strike beneath the squire's guard, Ferran was ready. He leapt into the air, allowing the mace to pass beneath his feet. As he landed, he plunged Corona into Lysander's shoulder.

Under other circumstances, Alexi would have taken pride in Ferran's skill. His blow would clearly leave Lysander's arm useless, gaining Ferran a critical advantage. But a victory in this contest would be hollow indeed.

The ghoulish spectators hissed and cried out their enjoyment of the entertainment. Alexi tried to take advantage of the commotion to break the Vapir's grip, but in vain. She proved as strong as any knight he had ever battled, forcing him back into his seat with hands that roamed too freely. Alexi swallowed bile at her touch.

Again she breathed into his ear. "Be still, my precious one. The fun has scarcely begun, though your brother seems to have the upper hand. Of course, once he dispatches our old comrade, an even more dramatic fate awaits him."

Alexi longed to learn what the Vapir meant, but he didn't want to give her the satisfaction of asking. The hate within him simmered. The moment he got his hands on Corona, he would make her its first victim. He could hardly wait to see the vampyre go up in holy flames.

She ran her bony fingers along his jaw and neck. His flesh crawled wherever her foul touch strayed. "I wonder," she purred, unable to resist provoking him further despite his refusal to take her bait, "what happens to a sacred sword when one throws himself upon it?"

Rage nearly choked him. These fiends intended to execute his friends in the most heinous of ways. And in the process, they also hoped to defile Corona, robbing the blade of its divine power by employing it as an instrument of evil. First Ferran would slay a priest of Brigit with the sword, then use it to commit suicide. Such profane abuse would almost certainly render Corona corrupt in the Eye of Belenus.

Cold hatred flooded his veins and filled his mind with thoughts of retribution. No doubt the fiends intended to slay him, too—probably with his own sword. Let them. Before they delivered the killing stroke, he would destroy as many of them as possible. If Corona would no longer respond to him, he would use his bare hands if necessary. He would crush the Ghoul Lord's skull and break the Vapir's body with his fists.

The sound of metal on stone shattered Alexi's violent reverie. Lysander had managed to land a glancing blow on Ferran's leg. The squire had fallen, striking Corona's blade against the cold stone floor. It rang sharply, releasing a shower of sparks.

Lysander raised the mace above his head. The fire of chaos and destruction burned in his eyes, as it did in those of the Vapir and the Ghoul Lord. Both of his captors leaned forward, their features showing their hunger for the imminent moment of death. As the monk brought his weapon down, the Vapir's embrace tightened. Her fingernails cut into Alexi's flesh, causing

rivulets of blood to flow from the jagged punctures.

But Ferran wasn't prepared to die just yet.

In the instant before the mace crushed the boy's skull, Ferran rolled quickly to the side. A great impact rang through the temple as the weapon crashed into the stone floor. The squire sprang to his feet as Lysander recovered from the momentum of the blow. In a second, the two men faced each other again, just as they had at the start of the duel.

The Vapir purred like an obscene cat. Alexi jerked as her tongue flicked over the wounds her excitement had opened in his arm. Nausea threatened to overcome him as she loosened her grip to lap at the blood that trickled from his veins.

He glanced at the Ghoul Lord. The duel completely occupied the diabolical master's attention. With the Vapir momentarily distracted by the taste of his blood, Alexi saw his chance.

He sprang forward, throwing off the Vapir's grip.

In three long strides, he reached Ferran and Lysander. Even in that short space of time, Alexi sensed the tide of events turning against him. Throughout the minster, ghouls poured from the darkness. In seconds they would overwhelm him again.

He lunged at Ferran, hoping to wrench Corona from his brother's hands. But the Vapir must have sensed Alexi's intent. Still under her control, Ferran whirled to face his brother. Alexi knew the undead temptress would order the squire to strike him down.

Even in his weakened condition, Ferran struggled against her command. The youth's features knotted in defiance. In his heart, he balked at attacking his brother. Yet despite this mental resistance, the young squire's limbs obeyed his undead mistress.

That momentary struggle, however, was enough.

Nearly blinded by fury for his captors, Alexi crashed into Ferran and brought the two of them tumbling to the ground. Rough stone tore at his cheek as the knight cracked his head against the floor. For a moment, he didn't know where he was. His ears rang, and a shower of flickering stars tore his vision apart.

Then the ghouls were upon him.

Even as his hands grabbed frantically for the hilt of his holy sword, the ghouls yanked him in what felt like six different directions at once. The choking stench of the undead fell upon him from all sides. Torchlight glinted off sinister black eyes and trickled along the gleaming edges of upraised talons.

Hatred coursed through Alexi. He must not let these foul beings triumph. With a final, desperate grasp, his fingers instinctively closed around Corona's hilt. A wicked smile came to the knight's lips as he shouted the last words these ghouls would ever hear.

"Karnas, radamar!"

The minster remained dark. Corona shed no light.

No! Alexi's mind screamed.

His very spirit blazing with wrath, he slashed at the nearest ghouls, slicing off heads and limbs before the creatures knew what had hit them. Black ichor spurted onto the defiled altar as screams filled the air. Darkness surged through him like lightning ripping the sky.

Yet even as he cut a swath through the sea of bodies around him, Alexi felt a feather-light caress touch his raging heart. He'd experienced the sensation only once before in his life, when he'd believed that Belenus called him to become a paladin.

It was a moment of grace.

The touch lasted just a fraction of a second, but in that moment, the eternal light of Belenus enabled him to see clearly.

The evil inside him had taken over. He had to resist it, contain it, control it. Or be damned.

He parried the ghouls' swipes and blows, barely keeping their paralytic talons at bay as he fought the real battle raging inside himself. With a prayer to Belenus and every scrap of will and faith he could muster, he forced the burgeoning hatred within him back into its imaginary cell. He nearly collapsed with the effort of fighting on two fronts—one a struggle to defend his body, the other a war to save his soul.

Trembling as he strained to maintain his tenuous hold over the evil, he once again called out to Corona.

With an almost audible surge, light filled the befouled temple. Like hot water poured into a basin, the sun-bright rays splashed against the walls and rolled across the remnants of the gilded dome.

The cries of dying ghouls sounded at once terrible and beautiful. The smell of their burning flesh filled the air, choking him even as Corona's radiance promised life and hope and justice, the ultimate triumph of good over all that is evil and dark.

Not far from Alexi, Ferran was shaking his head, as if trying to clear it. He had gotten to his knees, but had not fully recovered from the effects of the Vapir's will. She no longer commanded Ferran and Lysander, but it would take some time before...

Lysander!

Alexi whirled about, still holding the flaring Corona high above his head. A dozen feet away, Lysander lay crumpled on the floor. He had managed to throw his arms over his face, buying himself a few more seconds of existence, but he seemed doomed.

Alexi knew he should quench the blade to save the life of this holy man. But if he did so, the rest of the ghouls would swarm over him and Ferran. The knight had sacrificed men in battle before, but he had never been forced to stand by and watch a friend die like this.

Then a shadow fell over the tormented monk. Ferran had risen to his feet and staggered to his brother's side. Alexi began to shout out a command, then saw that no words were needed. Ferran moved at once to protect the monk whose healing magic had done so much for him.

As his brother fell upon the agonized figure of the pilgrim, Alexi turned away and swept Corona back and forth. He waded forward through the dying bodies of those already long dead. Where the glow of the magical blade had not yet done its work, Alexi struck with the cutting edge of justice.

He reached the pew where the Ghoulish Lord sat. Clearly the holy light had caught the foul master of Forenoon Abbey unawares. Exposed to the full brilliance of Belenus's wrathful gaze, he had been annihilated almost instantly. Little remained of the creature now. Alexi could identify the body only by the raiments that had marked the unholy creature.

The Vapir, however, was another matter.

There was no sign of the foul seductress. How could she have escaped? Alexi frantically searched the minster for her. Perhaps she had managed somehow to avoid the sword's radiance. Or was it possible that Corona's blaze had no effect upon her? Alexi clenched his jaw. Even if that were true, he was willing to bet the blade itself could still take its toll on her obscene flesh.

As he ran through the stone halls of the ruined abbey, the brilliant glow of the holy sword threw harsh shadows in every direction. With each racing step, they jerked and danced madly. Each corner seemed to promise new dangers, but Alexi knew he had little to fear while Corona burned in his hand—unless other horrors like the Vapir hid somewhere in these halls.

Alexi caught sight of his quarry's pale garments billowing behind her as she darted up a twisting flight of stairs. He pursued, though the slender corridor left little room for his muscular frame. The Vapir wasn't far ahead, he knew, for her sepulchral scent hung in the air. Soon his sword would taste her blood as her obscene lips had tasted his.

At the top of the stairs, Alexi caught a fleeting glimpse of the creature as she vanished through

a narrow door. Even as he reached it, the portal swung closed and Alexi heard a catch fall into place. He wasted no time trying the latch, instead hurling himself directly at the wooden barrier like a ram. With a sound of creaking, rending hinges, the door exploded inward. Alexi stumbled through the debris, hacking it out of his way with the sliver of sunlight in his hand.

As he lifted his head and looked around the room, Alexi saw his prey waiting for him. She crouched on the floor like a lynx about to leap upon a helpless deer. Her eyes flashed as the light of Belenus fell across her features. Every harsh line of her cruel face was sharply exaggerated by the unwavering glow of Alexi's sword.

And she was smiling.

That grin confirmed Alexi's worst fears. The fiendish Vapir was immune to the purifying fire of sunlight. Was her evil greater than Corona's good? Perhaps this land of madness made the dark things of the world more powerful than those of the light. If that was so, then what chance did he or any creature of goodness have to prevail?

The knight brought his weapon up to defend himself, wary that the crouching thing might hurl herself at him. He checked his forward momentum and locked his eyes with those of the Vapir. At this, the wounds in his arms throbbed painfully. He felt the overwhelming evil of her spirit pressing down upon him, but he forced it aside. His faith was stronger now than it had been in many days.

Invoking the grace of Belenus, Alexi swept his fiery weapon in a perfect arc that would end with the blade buried deep in the Vapir's breast. By the time he reached her, however, the vile woman was gone. His blade struck only the cold stone of the floor.

The Vapir's terrible laugh echoed through the room from behind him, ringing sharply off the walls like pealing of a sinister bell. As he whirled about to attack her again, she held out a transfixing finger and emitted a hiss that seemed to freeze his heart.

"You are too slow, Alexi Shadowborn," taunted the Vapir. "Your blade will never catch me."

"It shall not rest until it does."

He lunged forward. The tip of the sword tasted only empty air, however, for the creature had swept to the side with a swift, phantasmal motion. The sight of muscle and tendon working beneath translucent flesh distracted him, but Alexi tried to focus on his attack.

Spinning around to protect his back from an unexpected attack, the knight saw the Vapir had leapt to the windowsill. Ironically, this particular stained-glass window, depicting the triumph of Belenus over the dark prince of the dead, remained intact. The harsh light of Alexi's sword made the stained glass behind the Vapir glimmer. Her eyes burned hotly, and her mouth hung open to allow her dancing tongue to taste the stale air.

For a moment, the two faced each other in silence. Outside, a cold wind moaned in darkness and rattled the glowing facets of the window. Then suddenly the Vapir laughed again, and Alexi lunged at her.

With a backward flip, the profane woman plunged through the window. Her weight, slight though it was, shattered the stained glass and filled the darkness beyond with a hail of sparkling shards. The glow of the sword spilled out of the window as Alexi reached it. The Vapir plunged downward thirty feet in the brilliant shaft of light. All around her, a tumble of dancing colors filled the night.

She struck the ground smoothly and rolled across rocky, broken soil. Splinters of stained glass fell like multicolored snow around her. Without hesitation, she sprang to her feet and raced away from the abbey. She moved with the swiftness of a wolf, in great sweeping strides that made him doubt his own eyes.

Tasting the fresh, chill air, Alexi desperately considered his next step. If he abandoned his pursuit, the creature would be loose in the world. At best, she would carry news of the events at

Forenoon Abbey to her dark master.

To continue the chase, however, Alexi must spring from the window, perhaps breaking a leg in the attempt, and abandon Ferrari and Lysander. When he had left them in the minster, they were alive but weak and in need of care. There was no guarantee they would survive without his aid.

Then, from out of the darkness, a flash of racing blackness broke into sight, moving with a swiftness that Alexi could scarcely credit. A loud whinny cut the night air. Pitch. The war-horse must have smelled the blood of its master on the fleeing monster.

With a surge of furious speed, Pitch overtook the Vapir. Owls and bats and other animals of the night cried out in unison as the thundering hooves of the rearing war-horse crushed the Vapir's ribs. She cried out in the darkness, a sound of terror and sorrow that echoed in the depths of Alexi's mind. The Vapir lashed out at the horse with diabolical fury. But even her frantic efforts to claw the stallion could not slow Pitch's attacks. Again and again, the great horse rose into the air and brought its hooves crashing down on the fallen creature. By the time the unholy light in her eyes had faded away into final stillness, the slender body was broken almost beyond recognition.

As the last inhabitant of Forenoon Abbey fell, a change swept across the vast expanse of the Phantasmal Forest. Fiery glows of spectral forms appeared throughout the tangled trees. Echoing howls, as spectral and unnatural as they were joyous and celebratory, filled the night air.

Alexi closed his eyes and offered a silent prayer of thanks to Belenus. This night had seen a critical victory in the struggle against Ebonbane, but they would need still more help from the sun god to complete their quest. His prayer complete, he turned away from the window.

And was knocked to the floor.

A torrent of grief, despair, and sorrow assaulted his spirit, rocking his body with its intensity. He experienced the anguish of holy men enslaved by evil and forced to commit heinous acts. He felt the self-loathing their cursed existence inspired and the agony of their tormented souls.

When he thought he could bear no more, the evil of the Ghoul Lord himself battered his heart. He saw the destruction of Letour and Sanschay, the torture of innocents in the holocaust, the persecution of those who would not bend to Ebonbane's will. He saw the summoning of Ebonbane himself and his triumphant return to the world. And he felt Ebonbane wither the Dark Triad's wizard into an animated husk.

He writhed on the floor as the onslaught threatened to rend him asunder. Wave after wave of malice and wickedness crashed over him, until he feared the evil would consume him. Finally, as he experienced the pain of the Ghoul Lord's final moments of undeath, Corona's radiance ended his torment.

Alexi lay trembling for nearly a quarter of an hour before he could rise to his knees. This time the barrage of evil had almost been too great for him to survive. Indeed, had he, not Pitch, delivered the Vapir's final blow, the onslaught would surely have killed him.

As he stood, his heart knew great heaviness. For the darkness he carried within was stronger than ever.



I am impressed.

The child of Kateri Shadowborn has brought down the Ghoul Lord and forced the destruction of the Vapir. His determination is far greater than I had conceived. He has proven himself a worthy opponent.

It was the same with his mother.

When we faced each other, she had the power to resist my will. Her faith gave her a strength that even I could not break. I would not have believed that mere mortals could have such resilience.

It is her will that contains me even now.

So long as her spirit remains unbroken, I shall remain her prisoner. But her time draws to a close. With her spawn journeying ever closer, the moment of my ultimate victory looms near.

His demise will shatter the shackles that hold me.

Once Alexi Shadowborn is within my power, he will die. He will die slowly. He will die painfully. But he will die. And his mother will watch his demise. No matter how strong her faith, this will be more than it can withstand. With her spirit broken, I will be free.

And when I am free, this world will burn.



The wall rose out of the forest so suddenly that the riders almost ran into it before they realized it was there. One moment Alexi, Ferran, and Lysander were riding along the hard-beaten forest road, and the next moment the highway came to a sudden halt. Without warning, and for no apparent reason, a stone wall abruptly blocked their path.

When the company had come to a stop, Alexi dropped out of the saddle. He strode to the edge of the wall to better examine it.

The barrier stood in striking contrast to the crumbling monastery where they had passed the preceding night. At its best, the walls of Forenoon Abbey were never so precisely crafted. This wall's construction was almost seamless. Smooth, even bricks, all perfectly aligned, were held in place with an absolute minimum of expertly trimmed mortar. Any mason would have regarded the barricade as artistry.

In fact, the precision seemed almost too fine. Like a trail that seemed too easy to follow, it made Alexi uneasy and suspicious. A single word came to his mind: *trap*. Was the wall an illusion? It certainly looked solid. Was it a magical construct? Something told him it was.

Ferran dropped to the ground beside his brother and let out a sigh as he turned his head first one way, then the other. The wall extended out of sight to the left and right, with no sign of a gate or other entrance. Were it any lower, they might have simply scaled it. But at twenty or more feet in height, it posed a formidable barrier.

"We'll have to ride around it," said Lysander. "With luck, we will discover a gate."

"You didn't know this was here?" asked Alexi. He had begun to think of Lysander as an inexhaustible font of knowledge. The thought that so pronounced a hindrance might be unknown to him unnerved the knight more than a little.

"I did not," answered Lysander. "We are very near to the manor now. Though I have traveled in the mysterious land surrounding Shadowborn Manor, I have not been to the estate itself since the night Kateri Shadowborn died."

With a nod of acceptance, Alexi put the matter out of his mind. Taking the reins of his horse, he turned to his right and led the way off the road and into the underbrush. Ferran, leading Midnight, followed about ten feet behind. Lysander brought up the rear, although he chose to remain in the saddle as his lighter horse followed the others. Ember, now riderless, followed along, keeping company with Pitch.

They followed along the wall, skirting dense patches of thorns and jagged weeds that seemed to scratch at them intentionally. The brambles were thick here. Alexi also noted the absence of birds and other animal life. Although he said nothing to the others, these observations disturbed him. Back at the road, the forest had appeared normal enough. The farther away from the path they traveled, however, the more menacing their surroundings grew.

After fifteen minutes, they determined that the wall wasn't straight, as it had appeared when they first came upon it. Instead, it curved away from them imperceptibly. Given enough time, it would describe a complete circle, leading them right back to the road.

Half an hour passed. Alexi wondered if they were going to find a gate at all. The forest had become quite feral, and he was beginning to feel that some dark presence watched their every step.

Was this twisted place still a part of the Phantasmal Forest? Most likely it was. Alexi began to worry about their safety. Darkness couldn't be more than a few hours away, and he had no wish

to test the hospitality of the spirits a second time.

When three-quarters of an hour had passed, Alexi was ready to give up hope. They must be almost back to the road, he knew, and yet they had seen no sign of a gate or portal. He released a disgusted sigh.

"I think there must have been a hidden entrance back near the road." Ferran swatted a swarm of gnats away from his face. No sooner had he made this gesture than they returned again. Despite the cool air here, the annoying creatures were as common as they had been in the swamp.

Alexi nodded. Ferran's hunch seemed logical enough. Yet did logic carry any weight in this place? Even if a secret entrance did exist, he doubted they could find it in all that length of wall.

Then, as quickly as they had come upon the wall in the first place, they reached the road once more. An hour wasted, and they were right back where they had begun.

Ferran looked at him and shrugged. So casual a gesture brought a wry smile to the knight's face. It mattered little, Alexi supposed, how hard it was to get past the wall. They had certainly overcome more challenging problems than this one. He was reminded of the scriptural verse in which Belenus told the Great Prophet to listen well to the words of children and madmen. He would not be the first knight to learn a lesson from his squire.

"All right, Ferrari," he said. "Go ahead and search for that secret entrance."

The boy stepped over to the wall, stopping about six feet away to study it. Alexi could see no imperfections in the barrier; judging from Ferran's furrowed brow, neither could his brother. Frowning, Ferran moved closer to the wall.

"Is your squire skilled in such matters?" asked Lysander.

"Not that I'm aware of."

Suddenly Ferran cried out. Alexi darted to his brother's side. Lysander arrived only a second behind the warrior, his supernatural speed surprising Alexi once again.

Alexi gasped. At first he thought Ferran's hands had been cleanly cut from his wrists. But then he saw the truth. The boy's hands had sunk into the wall, as if he had buried them in sand at the beach. Around them, the seamlessly stacked surface of bricks spread out evenly.

"I—I reached out to touch the wall," Ferran said, "but it wasn't there. Before I knew what was happening, I'd stuck my hands inside it. When I tried to pull them out, they wouldn't budge!"

"An illusion?" muttered Alexi.

"No," Lysander responded. "An illusion is nothing more than a construct of light, not unlike a rainbow or ray of sunshine. Ferran could not be bound by it. This is something else. I have never encountered its like before."

For nearly a minute, no one spoke. At last, however, a smile spread across Alexi's face. "I think I have it. Try pushing your hands in a little farther."

Ferran turned wide eyes upon him. "Why? That'll only make things worse!"

"First of all," said Alexi, "things can't get any worse. You're already stuck. If you sink your arms in up to the elbows, you won't be any more or less trapped, right?"

Ferran nodded, but still did not do as he had been told.

"The only other way that I can see to free you," said Alexi, "is to cut off your hands. While Lysander might be able to keep you from bleeding to death after we did that, I doubt he could grow you a new pair of hands."

Ferran glanced expectantly at the withered man. With a gentle shrug, the old man admitted that Alexi was right.

Swallowing hard, Ferran eased his arms inward. As expected, he met with no resistance. And just as predictably, they could not be withdrawn again.

"I think the only way you're going to get out of this is to press on through the wall," Alexi decided.

Ferran's eyes widened.

"I think you are correct," said Lysander.

Without another word, Ferran nodded. He closed his eyes, drew in a deep breath, and stepped forward. The wall seemed to flow around him like water, but no ripple marked his passage into the seemingly solid barrier.

"I have to go after him," said Alexi.

"Of course," said Lysander, "but I'm coming with you."

Alexi considered ordering the old man to stay behind. After all, there was no need risking both their lives. On the other hand, they had no idea what waited beyond the wall. Ultimately the knight nodded in agreement.

Alexi grabbed the reins of Pitch and Midnight. He took two steps toward the wall and, with a sleek clang of steel, brought out his sword. Drawing in a sharp breath, he spoke the ancient command words to bring the magic weapon to life.

The blade at once sheathed itself in a brilliant radiance. With the war-horses in hand, Alexi threw himself at the bricks. Half of him expected to hit and bounce off, but as he struck the wall, he experienced a tingling sensation, then found himself surrounded by a cool, ruddy darkness.

He was inside the wall.

After blinking several times, he realized the deep red haze that surrounded him wasn't going to clear. He turned his head to the left and then slowly to the right but could see nothing else around him. He could still feel the reins of the horses in his hand, but he couldn't see them. Indeed, his vision didn't even extend all the way to his own wrists. It was like walking through an incredibly thick red fog.

Then suddenly the knight became aware that he couldn't breathe. Panic gripped him for a second, but he forced himself to remain calm. He surged forward as quickly as he could, holding the reins tightly. The dark redness around him seemed to grow thicker as his lungs demanded air.

For a second, he considered releasing the horses. He didn't know if that would gain him any speed or not, but some instinct told him to do it. Reason overcame emotion, though, and he tightened his grip. Leaving the beasts to die, entombed within this semicorporeal wall, was unthinkable.

Just when it seemed that he could last no longer, daylight spilled onto his body. The horses emerged from the wall a few seconds later. As soon as they did, the knight collapsed. He gasped in great lungfuls of air, only half noticing that Ferran stood safe beside him.

When Alexi caught his breath, he forced himself back to his feet. He smiled at his brother and was about to speak when something occurred to him. Lysander hadn't emerged from the wall yet.

Alexi released the horses and threw himself at the stone wall. As he had expected, it was solid on this side. Whoever—or whatever—had built this magical barrier did so to keep things in, not out. But was it a cage or a trap? Had he and his companions just stepped into a snare from which there was no escape?

"Lysander!" cried Alexi. He pounded his hands on the wall, as if hoping to crack it open and free the pilgrim. For fifteen or thirty seconds, his futile assault continued. Then, realizing that he could do nothing, he allowed his hands to fall to his side.

"There's no way out," said Ferran. "I even tried climbing it. Something about it makes it impossible to get a grip on the bricks. I haven't tried a ladder or anything, but I'd bet that won't work either."

Alexi looked up into his brother's eyes. "You can't breathe in there," he said with false composure.

"You don't have to tell me," said the squire. "I was in worse shape than you were when I finally got out."

"If Lysander doesn't get out soon..." began Alexi. He turned to face the featureless wall, but saw only the perfectly smooth stone pattern staring back at him. He gripped his magical sword in steely fingers, but even the great weapon could do nothing for him now.

He felt powerless—as he had during the Darkening, as he had when he the ghouls had taken his brother, as he had when he watched Dasmaria die.

If Lysander was trapped forever, it would be a loss to both the quest and Alexi personally. There was so much he wanted to know about the old man and so much that Lysander could tell him about Kateri Shadowborn. The pilgrim was a link to Alexi's past unlike any he had found before.

After an eternal minute had passed, he turned away. from the wall. This ill-fated quest of his had claimed another friend.

"We've lost him," he said to his brother in a lifeless monotone.

"Lost whom?" Lysander's sandpaper voice emerged from the wall just a moment before he did. His slender mare trotted out beside Ember, their reins held loosely in the old man's hand. "I'm sorry if I caused you any concern. It took me a few minutes to persuade Dasmaria's horse to follow me."

"But there's no air in there," gasped Alexi. "I thought you were dead."

"I am," said the monk. "I suppose the horses might have noticed the lack of air, but I never did."

Alexi started to say more, to laugh at his own folly, but then saw that the old man no longer paid any attention to him. Instead, his eyes focused on something behind them. Alexi turned around, ready to defend himself, but there was no need.

Lysander was staring at Shadowborn Manor.

Alexi's mouth fell open as his sword dropped low in his hand. While his concern for Lysander was at the forefront, he had taken no notice of the grounds beyond the wall. The place was very much like the home he had grown up in, a sprawling estate built atop a shallow crest with a single bell tower rising from its center. The brilliant sun shone down upon it, gleaming on the whitewashed walls and giving the place a radiance of its own. Where light struck the flawlessly cast windows of the upper floor, it flashed like a brilliant beacon in the perfect azure sky.

A grassy lawn surrounded the place, spreading out to touch the edges of the mysterious wall. A broad cobblestone road ran away from the brick barrier behind them to a carriage house near the front of the manor. To Alexi, the place looked like an island floating in the midst of a great emerald sea of faintly rippling grass.

Alexi could see nothing to stop him from riding right up to the front door of the manor and marching inside. Evil had never been so accommodating.

Lysander seemed to sense his thoughts. He nodded solemnly and stepped closer to Alexi. "I do not think approaching the manor or even getting inside will be our problem. The evil we face is content to wait for us to come to it. After all, Ebonbane knows we must come, for if we turn away now, our entire journey will have been in vain."

Alexi thought about that for a second. It wasn't the way he would have planned to do things, but there was truth in Lysander's words. Ebonbane certainly knew the threesome had arrived and would be waiting for them. There was no way around it: They would have to ride up to the manor house. Alexi felt like a fly compelled to hurl himself directly into the heart of a spider's web. It was suicide, but what other choice did he have?

A sound of whispered words in the holy tongue fell upon Alexi's ears. He turned and saw Lysander offering a prayer for guidance and good fortune in the battle that loomed before them. The knight sank his blade back into its scabbard and reached out to take the old man's frail hand in his. Ferran joined them, completing a circle. As one, they repeated the appeal for blessings that had traveled before the armies of the Great Kingdom for untold years. Even here, where everything felt wrong, the words held comfort.

When they finished their communal worship, the circle remained intact for a few moments longer. In silence, each of the travelers offered his own private prayers. It was a solemn time that all warriors of faith went through before battle.

At last they unclasped hands and broke the circle. Alexi turned to face the manor house. With no further word, he hopped nimbly into the saddle. Ferran and Lysander mounted their steeds as well, and the three faced their destination.

With a ring of steel, Alexi drew his sword and held it aloft. The Eye of Belenus focused on it, gleaming like fire against the brilliant blue sky.

"Onward!" he cried, his words resounding over the rolling grass like a clap of thunder.



Alexi spurred Pitch toward Shadowborn Manor. Lysander and Ferran followed closely behind.

As if the entire grounds knew that visitors had arrived, a strange transformation took place. Pitch hadn't charged more than a dozen yards before dark clouds boiled into the sky. So swift was their onset that the Alexi suspected the hand of Ebonbane.

Inside, he fought to quell the malicious presence that threatened to rise up at any moment. Since absorbing the energies of the Ghoull Lord and its minions, containing the icy fury within him had become a constant struggle. At present he could keep the force subdued without the effort requiring his entire concentration; he only hoped that when he at last faced Ebonbane, he could continue to exert enough subconscious control to focus on defeating the fiend.

With every forward stride of the horses, the sky grew darker. Soon an oily rain began to fall upon the riders. Cold and slick, it smelled of corruption and decay. With the downpour came lightning, leaping from cloud to cloud in resplendent lattices. Claps of thunder, booming like the reports of an army's bombards, pounded down upon them.

When they had crossed half the distance to the manor, Alexi saw that the sky was not the only entity responding to their approach. The land itself had begun to change. What had once been a neatly manicured lawn of curling green grass was rapidly becoming a tangle of thorns and spines. The cobblestone road upon which the horses' hooves clattered broke apart as jagged shoots emerged to slow their charge. Before long, the road had become so treacherous that Alexi was forced to give rein rather than risk injury to the horses.

Before their eyes, the manor itself transformed. Whitewashed walls grew gray with age. Cracks ran like a thousand spiderwebs across the surface, spilling onto the once gleaming windows. No longer was Shadowborn Manor the elegant home of a lady knight, but an abode of darkness well suited to the fiend they expected to find within the crumbling structure.

Some twenty yards from the looming archway at the front of the house, Alexi motioned the riders to a halt. He dropped from his saddle, Corona still in hand. As the others gathered around him, he moved forward. Ferran nocked an arrow in his bow, while Lysander held his gleaming mace at the ready.

As they reached the front of the manor, the rain pounded so hard that it stung their exposed flesh. The air grew bitterly cold and thick with the smell of rotting meat. The atmosphere was enough to challenge even Alexi's nerve; he couldn't imagine how his relatively untested squire must feel. But then, considering all that Ferran had been through recently, it was hardly fair to call him untested anymore.

"Do we knock?" asked Lysander as they came to a halt before the manor's ornate double doors. Alexi couldn't tell if he was joking or not, but didn't bother to answer. Instead, he met his brother's gaze. Ferran raised his bow and drew back the arrow.

With a mighty kick at the door, Alexi burst inside. Weathered hinges gave out with a series of sharp snaps, and the portal fell inward. It landed with a crash that was promptly smothered by a tremendous clap of thunder.

Alexi's sword flashed with the blue glow of lightning, but he faced no menace within the chamber. For the faintest second, the knight had the impression that his weapon felt disappointed. Did Corona itself hope to face the murderer of Kateri Shadowborn?

Instead of meeting armed resistance, Alexi found himself standing in the center of a

comfortable parlor. The well-appointed room displayed both the prosperity and refinement of his mother. Time and Ebonbane's evil influence, however, had ravaged the chamber and its trappings. Where his feet touched the ornate rug, they crushed it into powder, leaving marks like footprints in new-fallen snow. A plush sofa and its matching chairs had fallen apart where they stood, collapsed under the weight of the air above them. Something seemed to have aged everything unnaturally. Instead of only a decade and a half, millenia appeared to have passed.

Alexi circled slowly, his sword at the ready. He expected to be attacked at any moment, although he had no idea what manner of enemy he would be called upon to face. Twice, brilliant flashes of lightning flooded the room with an actinic blue light, but no danger presented itself.

Relaxing only slightly, he motioned for Ferran and Lysander to join him.

The instant the pilgrim stepped into the house, a movement flashed at the edge of Alexi's vision. He spun, prepared to strike if necessary.

A beautiful woman moved gracefully into the room, descending a long flight of stairs. The tall, slender figure wore a white dressing gown. Her long blond hair formed a nimbus around her porcelain face. Every movement of the athletic woman spoke of a warrior's grace and readiness. She said not a word to the three visitors, apparently thinking nothing of finding intruders in her home.

As she reached the bottom of the stairs, Alexi saw that he had been mistaken. He beheld not a beautiful woman, but the image of a beautiful woman. As she moved into the room, a steady glow filled it. The light spread outward from the blade of her sword, which could be none other than Corona.

"Mother?" he murmured.

"Kateri," whispered Lysander, recognizing the woman at the same instant. The monk made a sign of protection with his hand as he moved forward. "Is it truly you?" His shallow voice held awe and reverence.

Alexi didn't know how to respond to the spectre. If the figure was indeed the ghost of Kateri Shadowborn, she surely would not harm her own son. But if the apparition were some trick of Ebonbane's, the spirit could prove far more dangerous than any mortal foe.

He risked a look away from the creature to check on Ferran. The squire had not lowered his bow. Indeed, he had the gleaming arrow aimed directly at the phantasm. Should a battle ensue, Ferran would certainly score the first hit.

Lysander stood directly before the ghost now. Alexi stayed back, ready to respond quickly if something went wrong. The pilgrim was the only one in their company who knew Kateri Shadowborn. It was best to let him speak for them all.

Curiously, however, the spirit did not stop to talk. Indeed, she paid Lysander no heed at all, proceeding instead past him and toward the door. With a start, Alexi noticed that the door he had burst through hung undamaged from its hinges once again.

As the ghostly woman neared the door, two sharp booms of thunder filled the air, although Alexi had seen no lightning a moment earlier. Lysander turned to follow the passing spirit, his hooded head cocked to one side in curiosity. In a voice that Alexi seemed to feel rather than hear, Kateri whispered the words that would darken Corona.

At once the light from her weapon vanished, plunging the entryway and parlor into darkness. Lysander's robes rippled softly. In a moment, he had withdrawn his glowing stone. He held it in his palm, spreading a faint glow across the chamber. Alexi nodded his approval but immediately returned his attention to the apparition.

As the ghost of Kateri Shadowborn reached for the latch, Alexi sensed that he had watched her do so before. The scene seemed much like his dream. Sudden realization burst upon him.

"Ferran! Cover the doorway!"

Without pause, the squire moved his aim from the apparition to the portal before her. At that instant, she drew back the door to reveal a black-robed figure.

Lysander gasped.

The visitor was also transparent, as much a spectre as Kateri herself. Heavy robes obscured his shape, and a great hood hid his face. He held in his hands an ornate long sword, its black blade covered with glowing red runes.

The appearance of the monk confirmed Alexi's suspicions. He was seeing the events of his dream unfold. No, more than that: He was witnessing firsthand his mother's murder.

Kateri stepped back from the door, clearly recognizing her visitor. She seemed to relax but remain wary, just as Alexi had seen before. "What brings you here at this hour?" Her voice was faint, hard to hear.

"It could not be helped."

Sorrow crept into Alexi's heart as he recognized the voice—it was indeed Lysander's. Though Lysander had revealed the truth the night they camped in the Phantasmal Forest, actually witnessing the possessed monk's treachery was another matter entirely. Alexi's gaze darted to the old man, who looked suddenly helpless. Like Alexi, he had recognized the scene and seemed uncertain what to do.

"We found this weapon in the ancient catacombs beneath Forenoon Abbey," said the apparition in the doorway. "When none of the brothers could identify it or read the inscription, the abbot directed me to bring it here. Surely the wisdom of the great Kateri Shadowborn can unravel the mysteries that confound us."

Only then did Ferran appear to recognize the woman before him. He met his brother's eyes in a questioning gaze, and Alexi nodded curtly. To the boy's credit, Alexi noted, his bow did not tremble in the slightest. He wished he could say the same for his own sword hand.

Then, before Alexi even saw what was happening, fire burst forth from the dark blade. The phantasmal monk raised the blade above his head, casting dancing shadows across the entrance hall. Kateri's ghost cried out in alarm.

Alexi remembered this point in his dream vividly. At this moment, he had tried to rush forward and defend Kateri Shadowborn. His entire body, however, had seemed frozen in place. Now, with the same events unfolding before him again, he hesitated. Whether he was held in place by fear, apprehension, or disbelief, he could not say.

Ferran, on the other hand, seemed unrestrained. His bow snapped tautly, and a gleaming arrow sailed forward to pierce the apparition holding the blazing sword. The boy could not have released a more perfect shot. The feathered shaft struck its target squarely in the chest.

A cheer almost burst from Alexi's lips. But then he saw that, instead of instantly felling its target, the arrow had passed through the ghost as if the figure were nothing more than a thing of vapor. With a dull thump, it buried itself in the archway outside the portal.

At the same second, however, the real Lysander clutched at his chest and staggered forward. He released a wheezing gasp, then fell facedown to the floor. His mace and glowing marble clattered to the dusty carpet beside him.

Even as Lysander crashed to the ground, his spectral twin brought the black blade down, leaving a trail of crimson fire in the air behind it. The air was thick with the choking smell of brimstone. Kateri dropped backward and rolled out of the blade's path. The fiery metal bit deep into the floor, throwing a shower of glowing embers into the air.

Alexi darted around the phantasmal figures in an effort to reach his fallen comrade. Though he ducked and dodged, the spirits took no notice of him.

Back on her feet, Kateri brought the duplicate Corona between her and the ghostly monk. Using its point to hold back her attacker, she whispered words Alexi could not hear but knew

very well. The phantasmal blade shed a paler version of the real sword's brilliant glow.

Alexi knew only too well the effect those beams would have on the fallen Lysander. If the crumpled pilgrim were not already dead, the holy rays might finish him off. As he reached his friend, however, he saw that the phantasmal shafts threatened Lysander no more than the material arrow had his ghostly counterpart.

The spectral monk screeched in pain, sending ripples of gooseflesh along Alexi's arms and legs. He pointed his evil weapon at Kateri and spoke his foul word of command.

Crimson fire erupted from the blade, searing Kateri and knocking her down.

At the same time, pain shot through Alexi's chest. The iciness he'd managed to contain at the abbey ripped through him as the monk uttered his profane words. Splinters of ice coursed through Alexi's veins, forcing him to his knees.

As the ghostly murderer lifted his blade to deliver Kateri's killing stroke, Alexi clutched his breast.

For the second time, Alexi and Kateri Shadowborn cried out as one.



An instant later, as the ringing of Alexi's cry still hung in the air, the phantasms vanished.

A sudden blue light blazed outside, seeming to freeze the moment in time, before a deep, drumming thunder rolled in behind it. Booming laughter seemed to echo in the heavy crescendo of the storm.

The knight winced, his face contorted as he struggled to subdue the evil burgeoning within him. Inch by inch, he forced the cold hate and rage back into the place inside himself that he had carved out to contain it. All the while, an urgent voice tugged at the edge of his mind.

When the tide had ebbed, he realized Ferran was calling his name. He opened his eyes and turned to his brother. Ferran knelt beside Lysander. Alexi had all but forgotten that one of his comrades had fallen. After a few deep, fortifying breaths to steady himself, he hastened to the pilgrim.

Ferran frowned as his brother approached. "Are you all right?" he asked Alexi.

Alexi realized he still held his hand to his chest. "Fine," he said, dropping his arm. "But I can't say the same for our friend."

Lysander lay limp, so slight that his body seemed nothing more than a pile of cloth. Alexi drew back the seemingly endless layers of fabric to find the desiccated flesh beneath. Ferran, still unused to the fact that they traveled with a living corpse, turned his head away.

"You can't choose your allies in this world, Ferrari." Alexi placed a reassuring hand on his brother's shoulder. "You need to learn that if you aspire to wear the armor of a knight in a few years."

Ferran forced himself to return his gaze to Lysander. Though he seemed to understand his brother's counsel, he evidently had difficulty accepting it. Still, Alexi knew the squire would not allow himself to disappoint his brother and mentor. Alexi regarded Ferran with pride. The boy would make a fine knight.

Directing his attention back to their injured companion, Alexi saw no sign of a wound on Lysander's unmoving body. Whatever force had harmed him, it was not a physical one.

"I hit the spirit square in the heart." Ferran sounded apologetic.

Alexi nodded. "And it was an excellent shot. Would have dropped any normal foe in his tracks." He glanced to his brother. "There is no blame here."

"Can you do anything for him?"

Alexi drew in a deep breath and exhaled slowly, lacking an immediate answer for his brother. Lysander had no visible wound for him to tend, and yet seemed in mortal peril. Was the wound spiritual? Had Ferran's shaft somehow impaled his soul? If so, Alexi had no idea what he could he do to treat such an injury. Probably nothing.

But giving in to despair would do Lysander no good. Alexi could still sense some animation in the frail, withered body. He would not give up hope until he had at least tried something.

He closed his eyes and began to pray. Ferran added his own voice to the supplication. After a minute of prayer, however, a chill crept into Alexi's heart. His words felt hollow and offered him no comfort.

"Is he dead?" asked Ferran in the quiet, reverent voice one normally reserved for a funeral.

"I can't tell."

As if to prove he was still with them, Lysander moved slightly. He opened his eyes, clearly

straining at the effort, and pursed his lips. Alexi took the old man's hand, trying to comfort him with a firm grip. He put on a stoic face, the one he had used in the past when saying farewell to a mortally wounded companion. "Lie still," he said.

Lysander murmured something. Alexi could see urgency in his face, visible even though his animating force dwindled rapidly.

Alexi bent forward, trying to discern the wounded man's words. At first, he thought that the injured Lysander had slipped into a delirium and was speaking in his native language, that of the Southern Empire.

No... the word sounded more like the sacred tongue of the gods. The old monk must be praying, trying to find peace in his final minutes. Lysander muttered the word again. This time, with his ear pressed almost to the pilgrim's lips, Alexi understood him.

"*Lache*," said the fading man. His tone was one of entreaty, as if demanding the one thing he wanted most but knew would be denied him.

Alexi closed his eyes and squeezed Lysander's hand, already grieving the passing of his friend. Not only had the monk known Alexi's mother, he had also led a remarkable life in his own right. Now, before Alexi could fully come to know Lysander, the old man was leaving him.

The pilgrim closed his eyes, released a withering sigh, and lay still.

Ferran put his hand on Alexi's shoulder. The touch was comforting, even in this abysmal land.

"What did he say?" asked the squire. "I couldn't make it out."

"It was in the ancient tongue," answered Alexi softly. "It means 'Life.' "

As the word left his lips, a glint flashed in the corner of his eye. He turned his head to see Corona, lying beside him where he had set the weapon down to minister to Lysander. The blade caught the blue light of the monk's glowing stone and winked again.

Alexi received a sudden spark of inspiration. He sprang to his feet, almost knocking Ferran to the ground as he grasped the gleaming artifact and held it aloft. "*Karnas, lache!*"

A warm emerald glow spread out from the blade. Where it fell upon Alexi, it felt soothing and healing. He brought the shimmering weapon down, touching the flat to the old man's brow. As soon as steel contacted flesh, the glow ran off the blade like water. It rippled over the monk's body and then seemed to soak into his skin.

Lysander's eyes opened slowly, glowing clear and bright in flesh that looked warmer than Alexi had ever seen it before. If he didn't know the terrible truth of the matter, he might even have said the monk was alive again.

Alexi sheathed his sword and, with help from Ferran, lifted the pilgrim to his feet. After a moment of silence, the old man spoke.

"A most timely use of an ancient power."

"It wouldn't have been so close," said Alexi, "if you had told me about that ability earlier."

"That blade was a gift to Kateri Shadowborn from the lords of the east," said the pilgrim. "No one in the world can match their skill in the creation of weapons, magical or otherwise."

"Does Corona have more powers?" Ferran's eyes were wide with amazement.

"If it does, I have not witnessed them. Alexi will have to discover any further abilities for himself." Lysander, by all evidence fully restored, gathered his mace and glowing stone from the floor.

Alexi decided he would explore the sword's potential at some future time. Right now he felt the need to press on. Somewhere within the walls of this house he would find the evil that had brought them so far from home.

"Which way do we go?" asked Ferran. He had nocked another arrow and held his bow loosely. To an untrained observer, the squire might have looked unprepared for a surprise encounter.

Alexi, however, knew how quickly the boy could take aim and fire. Lysander's recent brush with oblivion offered more than ample proof.

Alexi looked to Lysander for an answer to Ferran's question. The old man, his hood still thrown back, wrinkled up his mummified face in thought. Evidently he didn't have the solution Alexi sought, so the knight turned without waiting for a response and led the way forward.

The cool blue radiance of Lysander's marble lit their way. The shimmering light did little to brighten their spirits, however. The magical aura seemed somehow unnatural, reminding them of the spectral nature of their enemies.

They stepped cautiously through a parlor that seemed nothing short of ancient. In its prime, the place must have been an elegant sitting room where Kateri entertained visitors. Alexi reached out to touch a low table, only to have it collapse under the faint pressure of contact. Clouds of dust rolled into the air, making the two living members of the party cough and choke.

Leaving behind that crumbling chamber, they came into a long gallery. Masterfully rendered portraits, encrusted with dust and lashed to the walls with thick cobwebs, hung evenly on both sides. As Alexi and Ferran stood ready to protect him, Lysander moved near one of the paintings and dragged a withered finger across the bottom of the frame. A thick layer of grime curled away from the brass plaque, revealing fine lettering beneath it.

"'Sir Redmond Shadowborn,' " read the monk as he glanced at the picture above it. The face seemed familiar to Alexi, having many of the features shared by his mother and Lady Victoria.

"Mother's brother," said Ferran softly.

"Half-brother," corrected Alexi. "He died several years before I was born. She used his bow when she won those three mahogany arrows you're carrying."

As they ambled down the gallery, Lysander paused to read the name on each painting. Alexi could place most of the figures in his family tree, although a few of them required guesswork.

At the end of the hall, a single painting hung between two candle sconces. Above it, a skylight allowed a shaft of sickly gray light to fall upon the portrait. Lysander stopped when he came to this last piece of art. He needed no bronze plaque to tell him who it depicted.

"Kateri."

Alexi stood beside the old man. The wafting blue light of Lysander's magical orb spread a cool glow over the painting, flattening the colors into shades of gray. The result was disturbingly similar to the bleaching effect of the mists Alexi remembered from his nightmare vision of this place.

A stroke of lightning flickered through the skylight, accompanied by an instant reverberation of thunder that sounded like a giant had slapped his mighty hand upon the roof. In the wake of that tremendous discharge, the metal frame of the window glowed with a blue radiance startlingly similar to that of the monk's supernatural light.

Alexi noticed that the same aura had sprung into existence along the edges of Kateri Shadowborn's portrait. It traced the edges of the ornate frame, hissing and spitting out tiny streamers of brilliant blue sparks. The radiance gave the painting an eerie, ghostly look.

And then the arcane image appeared to move.

"Alexi," sounded a ghostly voice.

The warrior's heart nearly stopped. He recognized the voice from his dream and the phantasmal encounter of an hour or so earlier. He glanced to the side and saw by Lysander's slow nod that he knew it as well.

"My son, listen closely," the voice continued. "I have not much time."

Alexi reached out his hand to the portrait. The glow faded from it, and with it the voice grew fainter. As his trembling fingers neared the azure radiance, the delicate voice spoke again.

“Our enemy is powerful—a spirit of absolute evil. I have contained him here for many years by force of will and faith in the almighty Belenus. But after so long, so much exposure to his overwhelming corruption, I fear that I cannot hold him for much longer.” The image in the painting softened into a smile but grew fainter. “You alone can challenge him, Alexi. You are a Shadowborn. And you are more than that.”

At that instant, Alexi’s fingers touched the outer edges of the magical radiance. The glow suddenly vanished. He yanked his hand back as if burned.

In horror, he saw the colors of the painting start to run. The pigments trickled like molasses, rolling across the frame and dribbling down the wall. Where they struck the wooden floor, they splattered and pooled. As the myriad colors melded together, they changed to blood.

Alexi jumped back. Fear covered Ferran’s face. The boy had been through more on this one quest than in the whole of his short life previous to now. Alexi wanted more than anything to protect his brother from the trials still to come.

Lysander seemed less affected by the destruction of the painting. As one who could himself work magic, perhaps the effect was less impressive.

With a meaningful glance at Alexi, Lysander fingered his crimson sleeve. The robe appeared almost black in the blue glow of the light spreading across the hallway. Alexi realized the monk’s intimation: How could the paint have taken on the color of blood in this dim light when his robes had not? Surely this spectacle was nothing more than a trick of the mind brought on by the fiend Ebonbane.

At a gasp from Ferran, Alexi turned his attention back to the pool on the floor. It had begun to run, leaving slender tracings across the wooden planks. The dribbles of paint formed letters, Alexi realized. And the letters made words—evil words that announced the presence that surrounded them.

Darkness fills the shadows,
Drowning out the light,
Step up to the gallows,
Embrace the endless night.

Even as he finished reading the sinister verse, the letters blurred and the ominous message shifted. Alexi blinked. The vision was gone.

The painting hung on the wall as it had when they entered the gallery. The enchanting image of Kateri Shadowborn was restored, and the floor retained no trace of blood or pigment or letters.

They all looked at each other, no one bold enough to break the heavy silence. Alexi forced a look of confidence onto his face and turned away from the portrait. He stood thinking for a moment, then addressed Lysander.

“Was that Kateri’s voice?”

“I believe so.”

Alexi nodded. “Do you think the first part of that... message... was truly from my mother?”

“Quite possibly. Ebonbane is not one to offer words of encouragement.”

Alexi looked to Ferran, who indicated his agreement with a nod. “She said that you were a Shadowborn and more,” Ferran said. “What did she mean by that?”

Alexi shook his head. “I don’t know.” His gaze turned to Lysander. “You’ve provided some unexpected answers in the past. Have you any clue?”

Lysander coughed and bent his head. When he glanced back up, he found both brothers’ eyes

upon him. He released a heavy sigh. "How much do you know about your father?"

"Only that, like my mother, he was a soldier in the Heretical Wars," Alexi said.

Lysander stared into his eyes for a long moment. "I can tell you more if you wish. But I warn you, it won't be easy to hear."

After a statement like that, how could Alexi not ask to hear the details? He bade the old man continue.

"Your father was a soldier in the armies of the Southern Empire," said the pilgrim.

Every fiber of Alexi's spirit demanded that he challenge these words. "My mother fell in love with a heretic?" The thought that he, a Shadowborn and a knight, could be the bastard son of a heretic shook his self-identity to the core. Yet he knew Lysander would not lie to him about such a thing.

"No," Lysander said quietly. "He was not her lover but her enemy." He lowered his head. "After the attack on Hammerlin, when Kateri was taken prisoner, one of her captors forced himself upon her. Battered and wounded, she was too weak to resist him."

Alexi felt as if he'd been punched in the stomach. "My mother was raped?" He turned his face away, not wanting to let even Ferran witness the troubled expressions playing across his countenance.

"Yes. After she escaped and returned to the Great Kingdom, she gave birth to her assailant's child. You."

Lysander cleared his throat before continuing. "Knowing she was needed in the south and that her life would never enable her to raise a child properly, Kateri asked her sister to care for you. Victoria and Vincent Shadowborn vowed to raise you as their own and never reveal the circumstances of your conception."

A barrage of emotions swept through Alexi. The hate within him welled up at the unknown assailant who had violated his mother. As he struggled to keep the rage in check, an even more terrible realization flashed into his mind: On the last night of Dasmara's life, he had nearly committed the same abhorrent act.

He trembled with self-loathing. Conceived in violence, was he destined to inflict it upon others? Was the evil inside him derived not from Ebonbane's influence or from the psychic energies of the fell creatures he had slain, but from his father's seed?

He saw in his mind the image of Dasmara's face, and grief wracked him. He had never had an opportunity to beg her forgiveness. Or to tell her what she truly meant to him.

That the darkness inside himself had driven him to behave in such an abominable manner toward her could never palliate his actions. Yet somehow Dasmara had known, even before he himself realized it, that some other force had influenced him. After his unpardonable conduct, she had not immediately walked away from him. Rather, as his friend, she had tried to reach out to him.

And his mother... how had she responded to her attacker? Had she granted him the same forgiveness she showed Lysander after the crimes he had committed under Ebonbane's domination?

At that thought, Alexi glanced sharply at the monk. Their eyes met. And Lysander's revealed more than the old man meant to.

"Alexi?" Ferran called softly.

Alexi tore his gaze away from Lysander and turned to Ferran.

"I want you to know that this changes nothing," Ferran said. "Whoever your father was, you are a Shadowborn. You are my brother. I've always looked up to you, and I still do."

With that, the squire extended his hand. Alexi clasped it, feeling warmth spread through his

heart. "I hope you'll always feel that way."

"I know I will," said the squire.

Alexi released his brother's arm and faced Lysander. "There's more to the story, isn't there?"

Reluctantly Lysander met his gaze. "Yes."

"What do you mean?" asked Ferran.

"Lysander is my father," said Alexi calmly, never taking his eyes off the old man. "Aren't you?"

The pilgrim paused. Then nodded.

Booming laughter erupted in the hall. Crushing in its malevolence, almost a physical presence, it rebounded off the walls of the gallery and smothered the group from all sides.

Alexi knew, beyond a doubt, that they heard the voice of evil itself.

Evil and death.



Darkness welled up within Alexi. The booming laughter, raining down from all sides, struck a chord inside, releasing a host of black emotions that swept through him. Despair tried its best to smother his heart, but defiance rose to the surface.

“Show yourself!” he cried. “Show yourself, you coward!”

If Ebonbane heard the knight’s words, he gave no indication of it. In time the laughter faded away, leaving a brooding silence that not even the thunder dared violate.

Then, with a loud snap, a series of locks unfastened. At the far end of the gallery, a door swung open. The darkness beyond seemed to pour forth from the portal and into the gallery, soaking up the light around them. A flash of lightning, oddly lacking the booming report they had come to take for granted, showed them that beyond the door lay a large kitchen.

Sword in hand, the knight started to move forward. Lysander, however, stayed him with a hand on his upper arm. “It’s a trap,” the old man whispered.

“Of course it is,” Alexi said. “What better way to find the enemy?”

Ferran stepped close. His jaw was set and his bow bent in anticipation. Lysander gazed at the two brothers, seeming to measure their determination. Realizing he’d been overruled, the old man nodded and headed toward the open door.

Alexi moved smoothly in front of the pilgrim in the manner of an experienced campaigner. None could doubt that a battle lay ahead, and the knight’s place was in the front rank. Ferran took up the rear.

The trio moved into the kitchen without incident, forming a triangle near the center of the room. Alexi took stock of the place, uncertain what he was looking for but sensing that they were nearer now to the evil than they had ever been before. This place held something—a presence no more visible than the air itself, but as tangible as a chilling bank of fog.

The stove—a huge cast-iron affair, cold, black, and brooding—first caught Alexi’s eye. Beside it stood a plain wooden worktable, its surface coated with the dust from years of disuse. On the other side of the stove, a long, low rack held a variety of cookware. Pots and pans of every description, all woven together by an intricate lattice of cobwebs, rested upon it in neat stacks.

Alexi barely had time to notice the rack of cutlery above the pots and pans before the whole room was plunged into darkness. The glow of Lysander’s marble died. Not even the unnatural lightning that had flashed continuously since they had entered the house lit the windows anymore. Alexi had never experienced more complete darkness.

Recovering his wits, the knight invoked Corona’s radiance. Knowing what the holy rays could do to Lysander, he did his best to hold the blade so his body would shield the monk.

But it didn’t matter.

No light emerged from the sword. Whatever force commanded the darkness in this room proved greater than the magic of the sword. The mere thought chilled Alexi’s blood. Might the evil of this place be magnified in some way? And was good doomed to fail in the face of so overwhelming an evil?

“Perhaps only magical illumination is affected,” said Lysander, as if reading his thoughts. The idea sounded very much like wishful thinking.

In the darkness, Alexi heard Ferrari shuffling. “I think glimpsed an oil lamp over here as we walked in,” the squire said.

If Lysander's hypothesis proved correct—if the darkness smothered only supernatural glows—Ferran would soon have a light going. If not... Alexi decided not to consider that possibility for the time being.

Ferran indeed managed to restore light to the room. It spread out, orange and amber, like the faint glow of a sunrise on a hazy autumn morning. And the instant that it did, Alexi and his companions saw their peril.

Every knife and cleaver in the kitchen hung suspended in the air.

The blades hovered motionless, menacing in their potential if not in their action. "Backs together!" Alexi ordered.

With a roar of thunder, lightning once again returned to the dark sky outside. The bright blue glare stung Alexi's eyes, but he did not wince or blink. Instead, he moved into position in the tight wedge, his eyes wide open and alert.

As if signaled by the lightning, the blades at once hurled themselves forward.

Alexi's sword flashed upward, neatly deflecting a large carving knife. With a ring of metal on metal, the utensil tumbled end over end to bury its point in the wall, where it trembled violently, whether from the reverberations of the impact or from trying to work itself free, Alexi could not say.

At the same second, a pair of thin boning knives ricocheted off his breastplate. He muttered a word of thanks for the snug metal cuirass, the only armor that he had decided to wear into the house. To be sure, his heavier plate would have offered him greater protection, but it would have slowed him down considerably. On the battlefield, that exchange was fair enough. Indoors, however, where movement would be restricted already, he opted for only the breastplate.

As quickly as one hazard was eliminated, another assaulted him. As he deflected and danced between the flying blades, he cast a quick glance at Ferran.

The archer had been forced to cast aside his bow after firing a quick shot to divert a large meat cleaver. Now he protected himself as best he could with the slender blade he carried. He swept the weapon, more a saber or cutlass than a sword, to and fro in an effort to parry the attacks of half a dozen dancing knives. Blood streamed from deep cuts on the boy's forehead and cheeks. Alexi feared they would soon be the least of his wounds.

The knight cried out in agony. Looking down, he saw a long flensing knife buried in his thigh, which now throbbed with excruciating pain. Blood began to pool on the floor beneath him.

He choked off his cry and threw an arm across his face in time to deflect a small dinner knife that had designs on his throat. How much longer could they hold off this onslaught?

Jerking his head as a steel skewer whooshed past his ear, Alexi saw that Lysander fared better than either warrior, wielding his mace with impossible swiftness. His inhuman skill reminded the knight of the ghouls at Forenoon Abbey, creatures to whom Lysander was as much kin as he was to Alexi.

Amid the clanging of steel on steel and the thumping of blades into the wooden walls, the orange light of the oil lamp glowed brightly. Suddenly it flared. Alexi whirled, barely deflecting a spinning carving knife, and saw that Ferran had lost his balance in an effort to avoid the attack of some deadly utensil. In his fall, he had knocked the lamp off the edge of the hard wooden table. It shattered, throwing its reservoir of oil across half the kitchen.

Wherever that blazing liquid fell, roaring fire instantly sprang to life. The timber of this sinister place was dry with age and burned like kindling. Within seconds, flames engulfed half the room and the air filled with choking gray smoke.

Alexi sprang to his brother's side. He managed to thrust an arm across the boy's face in time to intercept a rusted knife. It glanced off the knight's wrist, opening a long, jagged gash. With Alexi shielding him, Ferran grabbed at his bow, which had become endangered by the dancing flames.

Faster than seemed possible, the blaze spread throughout most of the kitchen. Wherever the flames touched, they instantly adhered and spread. Bits of fiery debris broke loose from the ceiling, raining down to help the spread of the flames. Alexi realized that he was doing more choking than breathing.

Lysander appeared beside the brothers. The smoke was so thick that Alexi didn't even see him until the man was upon him. His red robe hung awkwardly on his body, pinned here and there by knives that had buried themselves in the monk's flesh. Had Lysander been a living man, he would have been slain by these skillfully placed wounds. Exactly how much the walking corpse was suffering, Alexi could not guess.

The pilgrim gathered the two brothers in his arms, as if to protect them from the swarm of blades and sea of flames. A short prayer passed Lysander's lips, though Alexi could not hear the words over the roaring blaze and thumping knives. A hollow ringing sounded, almost below the range of his hearing. Then a shimmering yellow globe formed in the air around the three. Against the dancing flames, it seemed almost invisible.

The instant the bubble sprang into being, a pair of heavy knives struck its surface and bounced off. In seconds, a dozen blades—some bright and gleaming, others dull and brown with rust—were cutting, carving, and chopping ferociously at the almost unseen barrier that encased the little group.

For all the protection Lysander's spell granted them, it did nothing to shield them from the flames. Heat seared Alexi's flesh, and polluted air clawed at his lungs.

"We don't have long," Lysander shouted above the churning fire. "This spell will hold back the blades for a few minutes at most."

Ferran coughed. "What about the fire?"

At that instant, the room itself answered the squire's question. The floor beneath them tilted suddenly with a loud crack. The aged house, its floors every bit as brittle and dry as the kitchen walls, was beginning to collapse.

The floor crumbled. A shower of blazing sparks swirled into the air to mingle with their startled cries. The darkness beneath the decrepit manor spread out beneath them.

Then it seemed the maw of the flaming abyss itself opened to swallow them alive.



Alexi lifted himself to his feet. The impact of landing had knocked the breath out of him, but he recovered quickly. He leaned against a block of cold stone, drawing in ragged breaths as glowing embers and flaming debris fluttered down like the ash of an erupting volcano or the falling of infernal snow.

After a few seconds, he sensed something seriously wrong about the atmosphere of the room. Or rather, something seriously right. The feeling of dread and oppression that had hung over him since the moment he passed through the brick wall had somehow lifted.

Surveying the chamber, Alexi understood why. He stood in a chapel—a chapel dedicated to the worship of the all-seeing Belenus. In fact, at the moment, he leaned on the granite altar. This must have been the place where Kateri Shadowborn had celebrated her morning and evening devotions. The chamber had become so infused with the faith and piety of his mother that even the overwhelming evil of Ebonbane could not darken it.

Alexi found it curious that the chapel lay hidden beneath the kitchen instead of standing open to the sun. Perhaps it had been a secret chapel, protected from potential vandals among Kateri's hostile neighbors in the Southern Empire. Or perhaps Ebonbane's corrupting influence had twisted the original floor plan of Shadowborn Manor, shunting the sanctuary into the lowest level of the house.

Scanning the room, Alexi saw that Lysander and Ferran had not weathered the fall well. Both lay unmoving on the ground. He hastened to Lysander. Flickering debris had fallen across the monk, smoldering the old man's crimson robes. Alexi swept aside the flaming cinders, then dashed to his brother. No flames had lit upon the younger Shadowborn, but a dark bruise stained Ferran's forehead. Still, the boy clearly showed signs of life. Just as he was about to revive his brother, a strange feeling crept over Alexi.

Someone else was in the temple with them.

He slipped his hand to the hilt of his sword, only to discover that it was not in its scabbard. The weapon had been in his hand when the floor opened beneath them; the fall must have knocked it from his grip. Unarmed, he turned to face the intruder.

And knew he had no need of a weapon.

Not ten feet away from him, still and radiant before the altar of Belenus, stood his mother. Her white robe rippled in an unseen breeze, and her golden hair danced as if she were afloat in a pool of water. She looked shimmery and transparent, as she had when Alexi had seen her in the entry hall. But something was different about her now, something that made his heart hammer in his chest.

Kateri Shadowborn gazed directly at him.

There was no doubt about it. This encounter wasn't like the re-creation in the foyer, where she had been little more than an image of the past. Nor was it akin to their brush in the gallery or the vision he had seen in his dream. Here, where the power of her faith shone strongest, their meeting would be different.

"Mother?" He said the word tentatively, unsure whether he wanted the phantasm to answer or not.

"Yes, Alexi."

The spirit's voice was warm and comforting, everything a child could hope for. Yet it also conveyed a strength and determination unmatched in Alexi's experience. No—not quite

unmatched. Dasmaria had spoken with similar confidence and assurance.

"I—I hardly know what to say," he fumbled. He had so much he wanted to ask her, yet now he stood in such awe that he couldn't pull his thoughts together.

"Do not be afraid," she said. "Your heritage is only beginning to dawn upon you. Do not expect to embrace the whole of your past and future in the span of a single fortnight."

"It's all true, then? Everything Lysander has told me?"

The spirit made no answer. Instead, she drifted forward like morning mist across the surface of a reflecting pool. He reached out a hand and allowed the spectral image to pass between his fingers. It felt cold and frail, a draft of winter air trapped beneath the burning structure above. Alexi shivered.

The phantom came to a halt beside the body of Lysander, looking down upon the pilgrim with concern. The expression on her face spoke of more, but Alexi had difficulty finding words for it. If she were facing a man who had been only her enemy, her response would have been easier to comprehend. As a fellow warrior, Alexi could understand respect for a worthy adversary.

But Lysander was no mere enemy.

The man whose body Kateri Shadowborn stood over had been her captor, her rapist, and ultimately her murderer. Even if she had somehow forgiven him for his earlier sins against her, as Lysander had suggested, could she feel anything but hatred for him after he slew her? Though Alexi had been able to absolve the old man of his deeds, years and circumstances had provided Alexi some distance from the events. Kateri was no dispassionate outsider. Yet she looked with sweet compassion at the man who now lay on the floor at her feet.

"Will he recover?" she asked.

"I think so."

A faint smile showed on the spectre's face as she knelt down beside the red-robed man. Her delicate fingers stretched out to touch his cheek, but stopped short. Alexi could see the disappointment in Kateri's face. Her incorporeal fingers could never alight on Lysander's physical form.

"He has suffered much," she said softly, "in his life and beyond."

Alexi shook his head in wonder. "I must confess, your compassion surprises me."

"I feel no animosity toward Lysander Greylocks," she said, still gazing at the old man. "The wrongs he did me were not of his own volition. Though he never had the nerve to ask, I forgave him long ago."

After a moment of silence, Kateri reluctantly stood again and returned her gaze to Alexi. "But we have not much time. You and I must speak."

Alexi glanced at the hole in the ceiling, where the fire still raged in the kitchen. In the amazement of conversing with his mother, he had nearly forgotten about the inferno above.

"We're safe here for the moment," Kateri said. "Ebonbane has never been able to enter this holy place."

"Yet he has trapped you in it?" Alexi struggled to understand why his mother's spirit was here and not enjoying the eternal embrace of Belenus. "Does he hold you here?"

"Ebonbane does not hold me, Alexi. Rather, I hold him. At the moment I was slain, my faith in Belenus was so strong that it enabled my spirit to dominate that of the fiend." She looked deeply into Alexi's eyes, her expression weary. "Since that day, I have bent my every energy toward containing Ebonbane. He has remained a prisoner in this place, held here against his will. But he has not taken his captivity easily. He rages against me, seeking to batter my will and escape."

"For many years, I have prayed for a champion to come to relieve me of this burden so that my spirit may rest. I hoped someone would find a way to destroy the fiend who now dominates

Shadowborn Manor. Over the years, Belenus has seen fit to direct half a dozen champions here, each a Knight of the Circle. To a one, they fell before Ebonbane.”

Alexi almost gasped at this thought. A dozen paladins, the greatest holy warriors of Avonleigh, had preceded him here. If they had all been slain, how could he hope to triumph? And yet his mother had called him here... hadn't she?

“Did you summon me as you did the others?” he asked. “Did you send me the dream that beckoned me to this place?”

“I sent for no one,” corrected the spirit. “I prayed, and Belenus saw fit to reward me. But even if I had summoned those champions, I would not have called for you—not yet.”

“Why not? Because of the Darkening?” A pang of despair stabbed him. Did even his own mother find him unworthy?

“Yes, Alexi, but not in the sense that you believe. It is true that Belenus closed his eye because of what he saw in your heart. But he barred you from the Circle to call you to an even higher service.”

Alexi drew his brows together. “What do you mean?”

“My son, once in a very great while, a unique type of paladin is born, a holy knight who does not merely fight creatures of darkness but actually absorbs their evil to keep it from spilling out into the rest of the world.”

Alexi inhaled sharply. The ghoulish visions, the icy hatred he struggled to contain within him—he had known that evil resided within him. Did this explain how and why? Even as she spoke, he sensed the darkness in his heart responding to her words, recognizing and acknowledging their truth.

“You believe,” he said slowly, “that I am such a warrior?”

She gestured toward his heart. “Do you not know it to be true? My son, though you are not a member of the Circle, you are indeed a paladin, one of the most rare and noble order—what some call a ‘lodestone’ paladin.”

Alexi nearly trembled with the joy that touched his heart. All that had happened had transpired as Belenus wished. He saw now that his god had not forsaken him. Even in the darkest of times, when Dasmaria had died or when he had been forced to wound Lysander with Corona's radiance, he had been serving the Radiant One. A sense of peace that he had not known in weeks washed over him.

He noted, however, that Kateri seemed to struggle as she spoke. He could read in his mother's eyes the anguish Ebonbane caused her even as they talked. Each minute the fiend was attempting to destroy her. She must have spent every hour of the many years since her death in absolute torment.

“I always believed that you would succeed against Ebonbane where the others had failed,” his mother continued. “But I hoped, before you had to face such a great and terrible evil, you would have more time and experience to understand your calling and the heavy tax it will place on your spirit.”

Alexi frowned, trying to comprehend her words. “If you didn't send for me, then how did I come to journey here?”

“Your reputation preceded you.” The corners of her mouth turned up in a wry but pained smile. “When word went out of your imminent Ascension into the Circle, Ebonbane became aware of your existence. He knew at once who you were and understood your importance to me. It was he who called you here through the vision of my death.”

Alexi shuddered. How many of his other nocturnal visions had been planted by Ebonbane? The evil he had absorbed from the ghouls gave the fiend a handhold on his very spirit. “If he knew that you believed I would one day destroy him, why did he summon me?”

“Ebonbane called you here to destroy you.” She shook her head sadly. “I am weakening, Alexi. With each hero who came and fell, my strength diminished. You have always been my last hope. If you fall, Ebonbane knows that he will triumph.”

At that instant, a sudden groaning sounded from above. What remained of the ceiling bulged and strained. Wooden planks split as jets of fire forced their way between them. In rapid succession, a score of timbers pulled loose from their joints.

Alexi quickly glanced at his mother. Kateri’s image was fading fast. He reached toward her in a futile gesture. With a final, pleading look, she flickered, then was gone.

Fire and broken timbers showered down. Alexi threw his body across Ferran’s unmoving form to shield his brother. He wished he could do the same for Lysander, but he was only one man. He prayed that the old pilgrim would survive.

Savage blows and searing flames fell upon Alexi’s back. He clenched his muscles, trying to block out the agony. The disintegrating timbers cracked. Suddenly the heavy iron stove above broke through the buckling floor. It smashed upon the granite altar, metal striking stone with a sound like a great ringing bell.

The altar shattered. Stone fragments flew into the air, battering Alexi as if they had been hurled by a dozen slings. One glanced off his forehead, leaving him wincing and momentarily dazed.

In that instant, a spiritual shock wave swept through the chapel. The aura of peace and comfort that had set this place apart from the rest of Ebonbane’s sinister domain vanished in the space of a heartbeat. In its place, a hot wind of absolute evil swept through the defiled chapel. The sanctuary was penetrated. Kateri Shadowborn’s last refuge was no more.

Beneath the almost crushing weight of evil, Alexi gasped for breath, then wished he had not. Soot and dust scratched bitterly in his throat as burning smoke seared his lungs. He coughed and retched, half from the tainted air and half from the sickening malevolence that filled it.

The rain of fire had halted—at least for the time being. The majority of the manor still stood above them, although it was being greedily devoured by the macabre flames. How much longer the place would stand Alexi could not say, but time was running out.

He pushed himself away from Ferran, who was beginning to stir, and stumbled toward Lysander. The evil in the air had become a physical burden that threatened to drag him down before he could even reach the pilgrim’s still form.

Several timbers had fallen across the old man. Taking careful hold of the uppermost beam, Alexi flung it aside. The blackened wood seared his flesh, but his body was already so covered with burns and bruises that one more seemed inconsequential.

In less than a minute, he had cleared the heaviest debris from Lysander’s body. He knelt down beside the frail figure, unable to tell whether animation lingered in the withered remains of the old man. Lysander still seemed to have a presence about him, a sense of life or its equivalent.

Alexi ran his hands down the old man’s limbs, checking them for broken bones. As he had hoped, he detected no major wounds. He let out a sigh of relief as he considered how best to bring Lysander back to his senses. In that instant, the withered face twitched, and the narrow eyes opened.

And Alexi cried out in alarm.

Lysander’s eyes burned with blistering red. The same flash of evil that Alexi had seen in the face of the ghouls and their terrible masters now gleamed in the countenance of his companion—his father.

Before Alexi could react, the abruptly animated ghoul lunged at him. Slender fingers, tipped with suddenly dangerous-looking nails, tore into his cheek. The edges of the parallel wounds stung as if someone had thrown salt into them.

The force of the blow threw the knight back. He crashed to the fragment-strewn floor, scattering burning debris everywhere. As the ghoulish pilgrim charged toward him, Alexi struggled to his feet. A dreadful heaviness seemed to fall upon him.

With horror, he realized that Lysander's fingertips carried the paralytic toxin of the ghouls. At least, though the blow had been powerful, the cuts were not deep. He might yet have a chance to defend himself.

He grabbed sluggishly for his sword. As his fingers touched the scabbard, he remembered with a sickening dread that Corona wasn't there. His eyes darted, looking for the blade, but saw no sign of it. With the ghoul bearing down upon him, Alexi realized that his only hope of salvation lay buried somewhere beneath a blanket of glowing, smoking, burning debris.

He turned to Lysander. "Father, don't do this!" he cried, hoping to touch some part of the man he knew was trapped in the shell of a ghoul's body.

In a voice of pure evil, Lysander's twisted countenance expelled a gust of putrid laughter. The beastly sound, at once terrifying and familiar, nearly stopped Alexi's heart. It was the same laughter the trio had heard in the gallery not an hour ago.

It was the laughter of Ebonbane.

With a strength that defied his emaciated frame, Lysander hefted a great slab of broken granite into the air. It must have weighed some twenty stone, easily twice the weight of the man lifting it. As the booming laughter continued, Alexi glimpsed movement behind the ghoul.

Ferran had risen to his feet. Somehow he had also managed to recover his bow. Ferran's eyes met those of his brother, but they held no recognition. The boy must still be throwing off the effects of the fall and barrage of falling timbers. If he could come to his senses in time...

But there seemed little chance of that.

The possessed Lysander hurled the stone slab at Alexi. The knight rolled swiftly to the side, and the great block of granite shattered where he had just stood.

"Lysander! You can fight this!" Though he shouted words of encouragement, Alexi feared there was little hope of the pilgrim's throwing off the yoke of his old master. His will had been worn down by far too many years filled with far too much suffering.

The possessed pilgrim stepped slowly forward, his eyes burning and his rapidly elongating claws rending the air. A sinister smile curled on his withered face, revealing jagged teeth.

"You have come a long way to die," boomed a cold, sinister voice.

Alexi trembled with both rage and dread. He had never spoken to anything so absolutely evil, and hearing the words come from his trusted comrade chilled him to the marrow. The icy, sinister presence in his heart hammered at his chest, threatening to break free. Alexi forced it into submission but doubted he could contain it very long while facing Ebonbane's recaptured minion.

Then a source of hope caught his vision. Ferran had slipped an arrow into his bow. It was a dark shaft, not one of his normal missiles, but one of the three mahogany arrows Lady Shadowborn had given him. It glowed warmly in the light of the raging fire above.

Ferran blinked twice, as if trying to clear the morning haze from his eyes, then raised the bow and drew it back. The weapon betrayed the faintest hint of a tremor, evidence, no doubt, that the squire was suffering from the effects of the long journey and its many cataclysms.

Then Alexi gasped.

Ferran, eyes shining with that hated red gleam, aimed the arrow not at the approaching ghoul, but straight at his brother.



The knight's terror fills me with delight.

The color drains from his face as he tries to whip the corpse that was Lysander Greylocks into dominance. What a fool he is. The traitor monk is a relic of my past. Like the Ghoul Lord and the Vapir, he is mine to command. His meager spirit seeks to drive me out, but it is powerless against my superior will.

The gleam of hope fades from the knight's eyes.

It was his mistake to assume that his mouse of a brother might take me unawares. Although I am still somewhat restrained in the shattered chapel, this domain is mine to command. I see everything here—the smoke that fills the ruined chamber hides nothing from me. The younger Shadowborn has never been a threat.

And yet something unusual abides here.

In the time that it takes for the knight's heart to beat three times, I explore the whole of the chapel in detail. Since the day I was first imprisoned in this house, I have longed to see this sanctuary of light destroyed. With her chapel corrupted, the spirit of Kateri Shadowborn at last begins to fail. The death of her son will be, to her, the end of all things. Her will shall buckle, and the woman who has opposed me for so long shall be mine to consume.

Yet there is something about that arrow... .

The weapon that whelp holds is unusual. I look more closely at it, uncertain what to make of it. Then I discover the source of my discomfort. The shaft is no mere physical object. It is not the cold matter of the universe. There is a warmth to it, a light. It is a holy thing, filled with the magic of another power. And I sense something more. It is a weapon of light, and I am a creature of darkness.

But I easily evade the danger.

The boy, having been beaten and broken by the Vapir, is easily dominated by me. It is a simple trick to touch his mind and turn him against the knight. I merely repeat, time and again, one thought: *You stand always in your brother's shadow.*

The litany resonates within the boy's heart. He tries to drive out my influence, but it is impossible. I am his master now, just as I am Lysander's. I can sense the times in his past when the young boy looked with envy upon his sibling. On the surface, these moments are nothing, merely the common feelings any such creature has for one placed above himself. But the slightest pressure of my will augments them. A normal sibling rivalry becomes a burning envy. He sees that he has lived the whole of his life eclipsed by another. He is reminded that Alexi Shadowborn is not actually his brother. His so-called sibling is an outsider. An enemy. A thief.

The whelp draws back his arrow, the missile aimed directly at his brother.

The knight's face betrays his confusion. He tries to understand what is happening. He had expected his beloved brother to use the weapon against my puppet, but now he sees the truth. If he has any faith left in his wretched god, this will certainly shatter it.

The knight stands alone.

One by one he has seen his allies fail him. The woman who rode with him, the spirit of his mother, the shell of his mentor, and now his own brother—all fallen, sacrificed to save him or turned against him.

And yet he does not falter.

His eyes cast about the room, looking for some weapon to use against my minion. Any number of tools could serve him in this moment of crisis, but he rejects them. One and all, they would bring grave harm to his companions, possibly even kill them. His belief that Lysander Greylocks can yet be rescued from my power will not allow him to strike down the ghoul. Once again the weakness of good and light proves its own undoing.

His courage is remarkable, however.

His spirit is stronger than that of his companions. He was able to drive out the influence of the Vapir. Among these pitiful creatures of flesh and blood, his is a fire that burns unequaled. No—not entirely unequaled. His mother, Kateri Shadowborn, once had such radiance. But her light is gone now. And soon his shall falter as well.

The time has come to put an end to these games.

I summon the energies of darkness into the body of the monk. He raises his hands above his head to gather the negative essence of unlife. A sphere of midnight black radiance coalesces between his outstretched hands. The knight sees what is happening, and fear darkens his countenance. His eyes widen in terror. The moment of his death is at hand. Even now, the last essences of his mother fade from this ruin. I shall soon be free to leave this place, unfettered by her accursed faith in a power of light and hope. His failure will complete my triumph. His death will mark the end of all that he knows.

But I sense another presence.

It is a bright and radiant creature whose power startles me. Is it another such as myself? No, nothing that grand. It is merely the woman, Kateri Shadowborn. Her spirit, on the verge of annihilation, has somehow regrouped its energies. An impressive effort, but one she cannot long sustain. Without the sanctuary of her temple, her power evaporates with each passing second. She must know that she cannot harm me.

I know what she plans.

She will attempt to break my hold on the monk to save the life of the knight. It is a desperate plan, one with no chance of success. She will channel all her energy, all that remains of her essence, into breaking my control over the monk. She will not prevail. Still, the wisdom of my experience has taught me not to underestimate her.

I release the child.

As I free the boy's pitiful will, my hold over the ghoul becomes absolute. No power in this realm can break my grip, not even the will of the woman who has been my captor for so long. I cannot help but laugh again at her paltry effort.

But I am glad she is here to witness the death of her son.



The heat of the inferno sweeping through the manor house seared Alexi's eyes as he glanced back and forth between Ferran and Lysander. Yet the physical pain was nothing compared to the despair that threatened to overwhelm him. His two trusted comrades stood poised to kill him, and he faced them utterly defenseless.

Lysander towered above him with his arms held high. Between the outstretched fingers of his emaciated hands glowed a perfect sphere of absolute darkness. The ruddy light from above silhouetted both man and magic. The sphere was cold and infinitely evil, clearly the manifestation of death itself. Lysander threw back his head, filling the ruined chapel with maniacal laughter.

Through the haze of black smoke, Ferran held his bow steady, its deadly missile aimed directly at his brother. Anger showed in his features, an anger obviously directed at Alexi.

Clearly Ebonbane held absolute sway here. The fiend had turned brother against brother, father against son.

Even as this thought came into Alexi's mind, a change came over the chapel. For the faintest fraction of a second, the heat of the fire vanished, leaving a cool, comforting presence in its wake.

Alexi sensed at once the spirit of Kateri Shadowborn. But just as quickly as it had manifested itself, the lingering traces of his mother vanished. The heat fell upon him again in all its deadly intensity.

He saw, however, that he was not the only one who had felt this spiritual touch. Ferran's face, a second ago masked in cruel hatred, now appeared at peace. The squire blinked, looking at Alexi as if he did not fully recognize him.

Then, in a single smooth motion, Ferran swung the bow away from Alexi and fired. The mahogany shaft flashed for a second in the firelight, leaving a ripple in the smoke-filled air behind it, and buried itself in Lysander's skull.

The roaring laughter instantly changed to a howl of rage and pain that threatened to tear the room apart. Lysander's dominated form whirled away from Alexi. Its withering gaze fell upon Ferran. With an inhuman cry, it released the orb of blackness. The deadly sphere landed on the boy, crackling with the supernatural energy of nonexistence.

At the same second, a cool breeze blew across the chapel. A flash of metal caught Alexi's eye, revealing Corona's blade protruding from beneath a pile of soot at the far side of the room. The knight lunged for it. Somehow Kateri Shadowborn had bought him a few seconds' respite and returned his weapon to him. He might not survive the next few minutes, but he would not allow her effort to be wasted.

Behind him, Alexi heard his brother howl out in pain. He couldn't help but turn to look at Ferran. The instant he did so, he wished he hadn't.

The boy had crumpled to the ground, his body seething in an aura of cold darkness. For a second, Alexi saw his brother's skeleton clearly visible through his skin. As his face struck the floor, the aura vanished with a sudden snap.

Ferran lay still.

Too still.

"Alexi..." came an almost unheard voice.

The warrior turned his head and saw that Lysander had fallen to one knee. The wound he had

suffered from the enchanted arrow would have killed a living man, but Lysander had survived it—at least for the moment.

“Father,” said Alexi, feeling some measure of meaning in the word for the first time. “You’re free of Ebonbane—”

“Only for a short time, I fear,” came the barely audible response. “His concentration has been momentarily broken. The instant he wishes me to obey him again, I shall be forced to do so. He has merely been distracted for a moment.”

“There must be some way to prevent him from regaining control.” Although Alexi said the words confidently, he feared they were nothing more than idle hopes.

“Listen to me,” said the old man urgently, staggering to his feet. “There are times when the only way to triumph is to yield.”

Alexi frowned. “I don’t understand.”

“I yield to you, my son,” said Lysander. “Already I can feel Ebonbane’s presence bearing down upon me again. You must take up your sword and strike first.”

“No!” Shocked, Alexi shook his head, his eyes wide with horror at Lysander’s suggestion. “You’re my father. I can’t—”

“You must.” Lysander clutched Alexi’s arm, his face a mixture of despair and pleading. “I submit to you, Alexi Shadowborn, not to the fiend who has dominated me for all those years.”

“Lysander, I—”

A faint red glow began to rim the pilgrim’s eyes. “Now, Alexi! I can feel Ebonbane taking control. You have no more time. Strike me down that I may triumph over my true enemy!”

Alexi hesitated. But the red glow grew stronger, and the light of recognition in his father’s eyes became dimmer. With grim purpose, he drew Corona from the flames in which it rested. The hot steel burned his flesh, as if he had just drawn it from the heart of a furnace. But the pain was nothing to him.

He turned back to face the man who had given him life, preparing to repay that debt with death. He knew the truth of Lysander’s words, knew that there was no other option. His eyes met the sunken orbs of his father and saw in them a last flash of approval and pride. Then Lysander lowered his head.

Lifting the silvered edge of Corona high, the paladin commended his father’s spirit into the eternal light of Belenus.

The blade fell with a flash, instantly and neatly severing Lysander’s head. The body crashed to the floor, throwing out a cloud of ash and smoldering coals. The head landed a yard away, halting with its open eyes looking up at Alexi. The paladin could have sworn that he heard Lysander’s voice in the very air around him: *Thank you, my son.*

Mechanically, the act having drained every ounce of feeling from him, Alexi wiped the ghoulish ichor from his blade. Though emptiness echoed within him, somehow his eyes still shed tears. The drops, however, instantly evaporated in the heat of the fire.

Alexi knelt down beside his brother, fearing the worst but grateful to see the gradual, if uneven, rising and falling of Ferran’s chest. He bowed his head in a silent prayer of thanks.

A scant second later, the manor house above groaned loudly, and the snapping of timbers rose to a dreadful staccato. One after another, the supporting timbers of the house gave way under the weight they bore. With each failure, a new shower of flaming debris dropped like falling stars upon Alexi.

He quickly scooped his brother into his arms. Shifting the uneven burden over his shoulder, he eyed the looming blaze. Little time remained for escape.

He darted toward the rounded bulk of the iron stove. One great step brought him to the top of

the metal shell. It shifted under his weight, but Alexi kept his balance. He grabbed at the edge of the hole in the ceiling and drew himself and Ferran up with one arm.

He levered Ferran's body onto what little remained of the kitchen floor, vaguely wondering whether the dancing knives would be waiting to flay them alive. However, the beam that ran across the center of the kitchen commanded his immediate attention. The dangerously bowed support bore much of the weight of the floors above. It couldn't remain intact for much longer. The flames had devoured it almost to the point of collapse.

As he hauled himself up, Alexi noted with some relief that the knives had lost their enchantment. They stuck embedded in the walls or lay scattered about what remained of the floor.

He lifted Ferran into his arms again just as the timber above buckled. The entire weight of the manor shifted overhead, rumbling like the crashing of surf.

Alexi negotiated two delicate steps around the edges of the kitchen, where a thin lip of flooring still stood, and reached a window. Sparing no time to look out through the glass, he threw himself backward through it, trying as best he could to shield Ferran's helpless form from the jagged shards.

With a roar like that of a dying dragon, the great house folded in upon itself. Alexi and Ferran hit the ground, the knight only vaguely aware of the frigid rain pounding down upon him. He rose to his feet, slipping in the mud, then dragged himself and his brother away from the inferno.

When he had put a dozen yards between himself and the blazing Shadowborn Manor, Alexi collapsed to the ground, his unconscious squire beside him. He turned to look back upon the house and saw only a wall of dancing flames licking into the stormy darkness of the night sky. The flames must be spurred on by the power of Ebonbane, he thought. Any lesser blaze would at least acknowledge the cascades of rain falling from the dark sky.

The rain poured down on him in rolling sheets, biting the countless burns and lacerations that covered his skin. For the first time, he became aware that his clothes had been reduced to little more than rags draped over his body, held in place here and there by a buckle or button. His breastplate, uncomfortably hot even after being quenched by the frigid rain, bit painfully into sensitive skin. His whole body ached, and his heart wept with the memory of his fallen comrades.

A great pyre rose around the blackened skeleton of the once sturdy manor. Curls of smoke wafted upward from the blaze, forming a dark gray sheet upon which amber and crimson light played. In every ripple and curl of the cloud, Alexi imagined his enemies hiding, imagined death waiting for him.

Something moved within the fire.

Alexi climbed to his feet and raised his sword. Instinctively he moved to stand in front of Ferran, vowing to protect his younger brother to the last.

A shape slowly emerged from the flames. It was more or less human, moving with an easy, graceful stride. As it reached the edge of the inferno, Alexi saw that the silhouetted figure was armed. A long-bladed sword swayed slightly back and forth with each step forward. The weapon resembled a snake swaying from side to side just before it struck.

The creature had a decidedly feminine bearing, one of delicate curves and lithe movement. Strange, Alexi thought. He had always assumed Ebonbane was male.

When the black shape stepped out of the flames, Alexi gasped. The slender figure was not a thing of flesh and blood, but a living construct of darkness itself. It had eyes of licking flame, burning against its ebon form like glowing coals.

Yet, dreadful as this spirit of midnight was, its weapon horrified Alexi more. He recognized the menacing black blade the figure carried: He had twice seen it used to kill Kateri Shadowborn.

Alexi moved protectively closer to his brother's prone body. If in Kateri's hands Corona had not triumphed over the sinister sword, did he and Ferran stand a chance?

As the dark figure continued to stride toward him, its features grew more defined, as if it were still coalescing out of the infinite night. He inhaled sharply. The creature had taken on shockingly, achingly familiar features.

Dasmaria moved toward him.

Despite the onyx cast of her features and the smoldering glow of her eyes, the likeness was unmistakable. Alexi had no doubt that this woman, this animated patch of darkness, was, in form at least, Dasmaria Eveningstar.

His jaw tightened. This was blasphemous! Dasmaria had died in battle as a warrior should. To see the noble paladin's image adorning this creature of unquestionable evil caused a surge of anger to well up within him. Shouting in rage, he sprang forward, righteous fury granting him strength.

"Alexi?" said the figure. The instant he heard his name on Dasmaria's lips, his resolution wavered. The dark thing spoke in the same clear, strong voice he knew so well. Could he be wrong? Could the phantom indeed somehow be the spirit of his fallen comrade?

No. It was impossible.

But dare he strike without knowing for certain?

The woman made no move to defend herself with the dark sword. Instead of attacking, Alexi assumed a defensive position, ready to strike the instant his suspicions proved correct.

"I saw you die nearly a day's ride from this place." His voice carried the hard edge of disbelief. "How can you be here now?"

"I was sleeping in a place of light and warmth," the dark figure said softly. "I don't know where I was. And then someone spoke my name. It was a voice I didn't know. It called for me to come to this place, to leave the lights behind and step into a place of darkness. I didn't want to obey it, but I found I could not resist."

"Throw down the sword," said Alexi.

The shade looked down at her hand, apparently startled to see the sinister weapon it held. The real Dasmaria would have reacted much the same way upon discovering that her own golden blade had been replaced by this macabre weapon.

She shook her head helplessly. "I—I can't."

Alexi bit his lip. He knew this must be a trick, yet he felt the warmth of Dasmaria's spirit in every word she spoke. Had he not seen the ghost of his mother just a short time ago? If that spirit could appear before him, why not this one?

He raked his gaze over the dark shape before him. Even cast in darkness, Dasmaria's figure stood proud and splendid. Her finely chiseled features reflected the elegance that had been hers in life.

Alexi's heart pounded. He wanted to reach his arms out to her, to embrace her and tell her all the things he had not found the courage to say in life. He wanted to say he was sorry for the way they had parted. He wanted to say that he loved her.

But this figure could not really be Dasmaria. Whatever the dark creature was, Alexi knew Ebonbane was behind it. And Alexi also knew—or prayed he knew—that Ebonbane could not so easily command the spirit of a paladin. When she died, the all-seeing Eye of Belenus would watch over her. The sun god's power would protect her. Alexi could not believe that any force of evil might overcome the holy strength of Belenus.

Indeed, the evil Ebonbane had been commanded to enter this world by three mere mortals. As he stared at the shadowy visage, Alexi remembered Lysander's description of those events. A

triad of agents who served Ebonbane during the Heretical Wars had called the evil spirit back into the world after Kateri had driven him out.

These same agents had become powerful minions of the fiend, continuing to serve Ebonbane after their deaths. The Ghoul Lord had been one member of the triad; he believed the Vapir had been another. But where was the third? At a throaty laugh from the shadowy figure, Alexi knew.

The third stood before him now in the shape of his beloved Dasmaria.

Somehow aware that its disguise had failed it, the creature hissed like a serpent. Alexi jumped back as the black blade suddenly became crowned with a rolling sheath of fire. A violent boom of thunder split the darkness as the rain slackened slightly.

The iciness in Alexi's heart swelled and ached. The darkness and evil he'd fought down earlier screamed for release. He clenched his jaw, struggling to keep the hate and rage within from spilling out. He had to contain it. He had to maintain control. If he didn't, Ebonbane would surely triumph.

The false Dasmaria lunged toward Alexi in an attempt to skewer him with the blazing weapon. A quick vault carried him out of harm's way. The shadow's follow-through left her exposed to a quick strike, but Alexi couldn't bring himself to attack. Lingering doubts still held him back. What if he were wrong? What if this was indeed the spirit of Dasmaria, forced into submission by the demon Ebonbane?

In that instant's hesitation, the dark woman recovered and moved toward him again.

The flaming sword swept toward Alexi's neck, but he brought Corona into play just in time to block the attack. Metal rang on metal as the holy weapon deflected the blazing sword. Alexi staggered back under the impact. His feet slipped in the mud, almost bringing him down.

The cold fury within him seeped throughout his chest now, trying to winnow its way into his very spirit. He fought it back, trying to force it into its imaginary cell even as he prepared for the next pass from the ghostly warrior.

Another sweeping stroke of fire and steel split open Alexi's breastplate. Though the blow left him uninjured, it caused him to slip in the mud again. He flailed his arms, trying to regain his balance, but the effort proved futile. Before he knew what was happening, he found himself flat on his back.

Dasmaria stood over him, raising the flaming weapon high for a final deadly stroke. Alexi experienced a sense of familiarity, then realized that he had seen a similar image in the death of Kateri Shadowborn. The fiery black sword, standing out brightly against the darkness like a pillar of fire, was the last thing that his mother had seen before she died. And he was about to meet the same fate.

As he stared at the diabolical weapon, the blackness within him leapt as if in answer to a summons. And in that moment, he knew another truth.

The dark creature that he had come here to face, the wicked Ebonbane, was not a thing of flesh and blood like the minions who served him. Neither was it a spirit, drifting from place to place like the tragic ghosts of the Phantasmal Forest.

It was the sword.

He could see the image of a malevolent face in the flames surrounding the blade. A painful wave of horror shot through his body, tightening his heart and paralyzing his thoughts. He knew beyond a doubt that he was in the presence of Ebonbane.

He rolled aside as the blade fell. Its flames hissed out in a cloud of steam as the weapon tasted not the knight's flesh, but the soupy mud where he had lain only a second before.

By the time his enemy had pulled the evil blade free of the earth, Alexi had regained his footing. He brought up Corona, aiming the point not at his attacker, but at the weapon she held. If he could destroy that thing, surely Dasmaria's spirit would be released.

“Karnas, radamar!”

At once the glow from Dasmaria’s sword faded in the brilliant light of the noonday sun. In contrast to the holy light of Belenus, the ruddy fire of the inferno seemed a mere flicker.

Alexi had expected the glow to lance through Dasmaria as it had Lysander. He was both relieved and alarmed to see it did not—relieved because it might have spared the woman he loved suffering and pain, but alarmed to find that this shape of darkness proved more powerful than he had expected.

His grip tightened on Corona’s hilt. He had no choice but to fight the phantom, even if it was Dasmaria’s enslaved spirit. “Dasmaria,” he said in a trembling voice, “I love you.”

Even if the warrior was not the paladin’s spirit after all, he knew that his words would somehow reach Dasmaria. If Belenus never answered another of Alexi’s prayers, the sun lord would make sure of that.

But the words had an unexpected effect on Alexi himself. They eased the grip of darkness on his heart, subduing the evil enough to allow Alexi full concentration as he faced his opponent.

The dark figure turned toward him, holding the deadly sword at the ready once more. A cruel smile spread across her face, and Alexi knew at once that he had been correct: This dark phantom was not Dasmaria.

“Dasmaria, I love you!” the malevolent thing cackled in mockery.

Alexi sprang forward, calling out the holy name of his god in the language of the faith. Using every ounce of his strength, he brought his magical weapon around in a brilliant arc. He could see the dark creature about to counter, raising her black blade to block the onrushing steel.

He prayed Corona would not fail him.

The two weapons met with a thunderclap that drowned out the sound of the storm. A great burst of pure white light, tinged with a rolling halo of rippling red fire, spread out from the point of impact. The shock of the blast knocked Alexi off his feet and tossed him through the air. He landed with a splash in the slick mud, sliding several yards before smashing against the base of a gnarled tree.

It took a few seconds for Alexi to come to his senses. When he did, a sickening horror raced through him.

At first he thought he had lost his hand, for he felt no sensation other than a burning tingle below the elbow of his sword arm. The smell of burnt flesh and hair, a product of the expanding ring of light and fire, did nothing to ease his fears. Shaking his head to clear it, he pulled himself to a sitting position and looked down with trepidation.

The sight of his hand—whole—at the end of his arm offered him no relief. For while his numb fingers held fast to the hawk-shaped hilt of Corona, only six inches of the blade remained. The silver weapon, so steeped in the magic of the east and the faith of the west, was gone, destroyed in the striking of one last great blow against the darkest of all evils.

As soon as the sight of the shattered weapon registered in his mind, Alexi glanced frantically about. The shadowy, stormy landscape offered no sign of the spectral Dasmaria. Apparently the blast had torn her apart as it had Corona.

But what of Ebonbane?

Had the fiery light of Corona swept the fiendish thing out of existence? Alexi had never put more into a blow than he had in his final strike with his mother’s weapon.

He was about to sigh in relief when a dancing trident of lightning cast a wild blue light across the scene. The blazing ruin that had been Shadowborn Manor, the rain that pelted him like gravel, and the body of his wounded squire—all were frozen in his mind’s eye as if instantly rendered by an artist’s brush.

A deep roar seemed to tear the sky apart. Forcing himself to his feet, Alexi caught sight of a faint glow. At first he thought it was nothing more than the glint of light from the dying manor house on the slick surface of a muddy pool. Looking closer, however, he saw a sliver of black steel, glowing a deep, hot red, lying on the ground. Sweeping his vision across the immediate terrain, Alexi saw that the muddy surface was littered with dozens of these fragments—clearly the final remnants of the dire Ebonbane.

It was over.

He breathed a low expression of relief. In the distance, at the edge of the tangled and twisted lawn, he could see that the brick wall surrounding the manor had crumbled as well. Like the iron shell of the sword, that, too, had apparently been a prison for Ebonbane. The fact that it now lay in ruins seemed to signal that all was right again.

Or was it?

Alexi tilted his head to the side, sensing a slight movement near the bits of darkly radiant metal. He tried to focus, certain it was merely a trick of the light. The inconsistent gleam of the burning house made it difficult to see even the glowing fragments.

Another flash of lightning showed him the truth.

Slender coils of darkness rose from each of the metal shards. They looked like smoke, but they seemed unaffected by the drenching rain. Their color was unnatural. These traces were more—or perhaps less—than they at first appeared. They were darkness, pure and simple, just like the black emptiness that had made up the body of Dasmara's shade.

And they were rolling together, forming a brooding shape that loomed above Alexi.

The shape of evil itself.



Alexi looked around frantically for a weapon. He had a dagger on his belt, but he wore that more as a tool than anything else. Against an enemy like Ebonbane, it could do nothing. But what choice did he have? He drew it and gripped the leather hilt in his left hand. As an off-hand weapon, used in conjunction with some other armament, it could at least be used to parry.

Seeing nothing else that looked promising, Alexi grabbed up a long splinter of burning wood, a fragment of the dying manor house, and weighed it in his hand. It was heavy and would make a good bludgeon. Perhaps the blazing fire at its end would prove of some value against an enemy made of darkness.

The coils of blackness finally finished winding themselves together.

Alexi found himself breathless in awe as he took in the enemy before him. At least fifteen feet tall, the thing was humanoid, but very powerfully built. The creature reminded Alexi of the savage giants who lived in the crags of the Hordlands. Batlike wings stretched out from the fiend's back, flapping against the hot light of the fire in much the same way that a hunting cat swishes its tail. Long talons curled out from the fingers, looking more like hooks than claws. Alexi shuddered as he considered what those terrible members might do to living flesh.

All of this was forgotten when he looked upon the creature's face. It was round and fat, but marred with malevolence. Twin horns curled up from the temples, like those of a ram but with long, tapering points at their end. The demon's eyes seemed like windows of darkness within the blackness of its face.

The entire creature was sheathed in flame, just as the black sword had been moments ago. So much for the hope that his burning club might have some effect upon the fiend.

Alexi knew that he stood now before Ebonbane, a creature that had no place in the world of mankind. And against this beast, he held only a small silver-bladed dagger and a wooden cudgel.

"You have served me well." The fiend's voice reverberated in the night, causing the ground to tremble and drowning out the violence of the storm. If Alexi thought the laughter he had heard before seemed smothering, the voice of the shadowy fiend itself proved an order of magnitude much worse.

"I serve only Belenus!"

"Indeed." Ebonbane chuckled. "Perhaps you do not realize all that you have done for me. You and your companions have destroyed Kateri Shadowborn's accursed temple, weakening her to the point where I may now annihilate the last vestiges of her spirit. For that alone, I should thank you."

Silent, Alexi burned with hatred and doubt. Was it true? Had his actions led to the final destruction of Kateri Shadowborn's spirit, denying her the peace of the Eternal Dawn? And had he also condemned Dasmara to the same oblivion? He prayed it was not so, yet he feared it was.

The darkness within him simmered, nearly bubbling to the surface. He struggled to contain it, as his mother must have fought to contain Ebonbane all these years. Her memory granted him renewed spiritual strength—just enough to keep the rage from overpowering him.

"But that was not all you did for me, Alexi Shadowborn. No, indeed. It was your hand that shattered the cursed shell in which I had been imprisoned. Because of you, knight, I am free to leave this place and travel the world of man. The human race must be made to pay for my inconvenience, for the time I was forced to spend in this prison."

So saying, Ebonbane twisted his mouth into a wicked smile. He looked down upon Alexi, his

features lit by flickers of flame. The fiend seemed to ponder the nature of the insignificant shape that stood defiantly before him.

“I wonder, Alexi Shadowborn, if your pitiful intellect can imagine the scale of my wrath. Your great Heretical War was to me nothing more than a moment’s entertainment, engineered for my own amusement. To you, it was a holocaust—to me, a passing distraction. How I have an interest in your race that I did not hold then. When I have satisfied my thirst for vengeance, I promise you will see the whole of your world reduced to ashes.”

Alexi tamped down the hate that threatened to boil over and consume him. “My mother and father brought you down before. There are others like them. Our world is rich in heroes. You will fail, Ebonbane!”

“Yes, of course I will,” mocked the dark fiend. “As my fire consumes each nation of your world, you can repeat those words once more. Perhaps they will bring you some small measure of comfort.”

The towering dark shape that was Ebonbane began to move. Alexi jumped back, bringing his feeble weapons up to defend himself. But the monster didn’t attack. Instead, the giant went down on one knee and bent forward to look directly into Alexi’s eyes, an action at once condescending and terrifying. The scale of the obscene creature was utterly impossible to comprehend.

“You appear to be laboring under a misconception.” Ebonbane spoke in a conspiratorial whisper that echoed in the eternal night. “You say that your mother and father were the ones who brought my diversions temporarily to an end. I think, perhaps, you do not understand all that transpired in those times.”

The evil presence within Alexi leapt toward the demon like a child to its parent. In that instant, even before Ebonbane spoke again, Alexi realized the horrifying truth. He stood still, frozen with fear, fighting the urge to retch. The Darkening, his summons to this place, the dark nocturnal visions—suddenly all made terrible sense.

“Lysander Greylocks was nothing more than a puppet at the time of your conception.” A sinister gleam lit the creature’s midnight eyes. “He is not your father. The seed was mine.”

Hearing the words somehow made the truth worse than merely knowing it in his heart. The darkness within Alexi rallied at the fiend’s words, rising up to clutch at his heart. Despair swept through his spirit as the full scope of the nightmare became clear to him.

Hate and rage surged and spilled out. Alexi shouted in fury and lunged forward. Throwing the blazing cudgel aside, he gripped the gleaming dagger tightly in both hands. With vengeance burning in his eyes, he leapt forward with the name of Belenus on his lips.

The silver blade struck Ebonbane but failed to penetrate. Instead, the dirk bent and snapped under the force of the blow. The fiend lashed out with an arm, swatting Alexi away as it might an annoying insect.

The knight flew through the air, crashing down on the roof of a long-unused shed. The force of the impact shattered the decrepit building. With a crash of rotten timber and splintering panels, the entire structure folded around Alexi.

Pain wracked the warrior. It took all his strength to lift his head and take stock of his wounds. When he finally did so, however, his spirits sank still lower.

His right arm was bent and bloody, probably broken. A jagged splinter of wood had pierced the soft flesh of his forearm. Even if he survived this battle, Alexi might never wield a sword again.

Stabbing pains in his chest indicated that he had broken at least one rib. A similar agony told him that his left ankle was also shattered. He might be able to walk on it, but only with a great deal of pain.

For all this, however, Alexi was surprised to find that he felt no fear. Quite the opposite—he

was relieved, for the confusion of the last few weeks had finally left him. He fully understood the darkness within him now, understood the Darkening. The spawn of a fiend could never have a spirit pure enough to join the Circle.

But perhaps his faith would yet prove strong enough to vanquish his sire from the world.

Lysander, Dasmaria, his mother—all had said that his path lay elsewhere. As the spawn of evil, was he the only one who could truly contain it? If not, he would die trying.

“You ought to be more careful, boy,” mocked Ebonbane. “Your mortal form is fragile. It was very nearly destroyed.”

Alexi hobbled away from the ruined shed. “How lucky for me that I did not cheat you of your chance to kill me in some more glorious fashion.”

As he spoke, Alexi realized that his mouth was filled with blood. He spat it out and noted the loss of at least two teeth.

“Not at all, little one,” said Ebonbane, his voice thick with derision. “You are not going to die. You are going to live on, as Lysander Greylocks did. I promised that you would see your world in flames, Alexi Shadowborn. Ebonbane is nothing if not a creature of his word.”

The enormity of the threat fell upon Alexi with an almost physical concussion. He had been prepared to die. Death in combat was something he had long expected. No warrior ever rode into battle without understanding that he might not ride out of it again. That was part of the profession.

To live on, however, transformed into a creature of darkness, was something he had never considered. Even when he was battling the ghouls at Forenoon Abbey, the warrior had never considered that he himself might become as they.

At that instant, the dark force of Ebonbane’s will descended upon Alexi. He cried out in agony as wave upon wave of black, unspeakably evil thoughts battered him in a spiritual assault.

He saw the southern cities of Letour and Sanschay in flames and knew that the same fate awaited the whole of his world.

He relived the torture of his brother and knew that the youth would die here and now, never to become a paladin in his own right.

He felt every moment of the torment that his mother had experienced in this land, fighting to keep the evil of Ebonbane in check.

But worst of all, he saw the moment of his own conception.

Blood and filth and horrible laughter, he saw it all. It was more terrible than anything he could have imagined. Rage mixed with revulsion, and he cried out in despair.

But then he saw something in the memory of that most reprehensible deed. Kateri Shadowborn did not weep. She did not scream. She did not rage against her attackers.

She prayed.

Even in that dark prison, far from her home and any hope of rescue, she had not given up her faith.

And then another memory came into his mind. This one was not Ebonbane’s, but his own. He remembered looking down upon the body of Lysander as the fires of Shadowborn Manor blazed around them, as the old man told him that sometimes the only way to triumph is to yield.

When he had told Ebonbane that Kateri and Lysander had halted his evil once before, the fiend had laughed at him. Alexi knew now that he had spoken true, even if the dark thing did not believe him.

Ebonbane had shown him the misery and suffering that his monstrous power had caused. At the same time, however, he had unwittingly revealed the valor of his victims. Dasmaria had given herself willingly to save him from death. Lysander had endured decades of unlife to one

day bring Alexi to this place. And Kateri Shadowborn had used the power of her faith to trap Ebonbane for many long years.

The fiend was not all-powerful, no matter how much he might believe himself to be. Ebonbane had his weaknesses, and he had inadvertently shown them all to Alexi. From scenes of despair, Alexi drew only inspiration. He felt the warmth of Belenus in his heart, knowing the glory of faith and the ultimate power of good.

And then he gave himself over to evil.



The crushing power of Ebonbane's will overpowered Alexi. The knight sank to his knees with the weight of the hatred, rage, and malevolence that buffeted him. He could sense the fiend's spirit trying to force his own out of his body, to seize control.

He tried to rally his defenses, seeking solace in prayer and the power of faith. But the barrage hit Alexi on two fronts: Ebonbane's will assaulted him from without, while the darkness he carried in his heart threatened to consume him from within.

The fiend hammered away at him, never relenting in the torrent of evil thoughts. Time and time again, just when Alexi thought he would be able to drive the incredible darkness out of his mind, the attack would renew itself. Indeed, with every second, his enemy seemed to grow stronger and more determined.

Animated by a will not his own, Alexi's left hand clawed at his face, nails digging into flesh and opening the deep, bloody gouges Lysander's talons had left across his features. His right hand, still numb, twitched spasmodically. The dagger it had once held now lay on the ground at his feet. His pulse hammered in his temples.

Ebonbane was winning. Alexi sensed his own spirit being pushed out, inch by inch, as the fiend's power invaded. He was about to die. He closed his eyes, hoping to gather more strength by eliminating the sight of the monstrous abomination.

Alexi's will was broken. His spirit clung to his body with only the most tenuous of holds. Every bit of his determination had been spent, yet still the onslaught continued. The fiend need only exert the faintest additional pressure and the knight would be destroyed.

Suddenly the assault was over.

No. Not over. Alexi could still feel the looming evil of Ebonbane driving itself into his spirit. But much of its force was gone. He opened his eyes and saw at once the reason for this momentary respite.

Ebonbane was under attack.

The air around the fiend glowed with spirits. They swooped and dove, lashing out at him with spectral fists as they passed. Rage and confusion showed on the creature's diabolical features, but Alexi knew exactly what was happening.

The souls of the Phantasmal Forest, long-suffering and vengeful, had appeared to attack their tormentor. Whether they had been kept out of this place by the power of Ebonbane or the mystical barrier that appeared to Alexi as an ordinary wall, the warrior couldn't say.

The dark giant slashed at the ghosts with his claws. The great, leathery wings flapped as if the fiend were having trouble finding his balance. He roared with a primal rage that struck a cord of instinctual fear somewhere in Alexi's heart.

Once Ebonbane overcame his initial surprise, he proved himself more than equal to the challenge presented by the spirits. As his blows found their mark, wicked black talons rent the ghosts as if they were made of paper. Torn apart, the phantoms howled a final shriek of anguish before fading into nothingness.

If Alexi were going to take advantage of this distraction, he would have to act fast. He rolled to the side, desperate to find any weapon that might prove effective against the fiend. The remnants of Corona lay scattered about, but none of them offered any use.

He shifted his gaze elsewhere, wincing as pain shot from his ribs. A sympathetic pain throbbed in his right arm, making the bloody fingers of his hand twitch spasmodically. The only weapon

he could spot was the slender sword his brother wore.

Alexi dragged himself over to his brother's still form. He could see life in the boy yet, but whether that was a blessing or not he couldn't say. If Ferran were left to the mercy of Ebonbane, his fate would be terrible indeed.

He reached for the blade, his hand trembling with pain and fatigue. Why he should expect this weapon to fare any better than the broken dagger, he could not imagine.

Then he saw the mahogany shafts.

With renewed energy, he grabbed the silver-tipped arrows. The squire's bow had been left behind in the blazing manor, but perhaps their shafts could yet work their magic.

He turned around with struggling steps and drove himself toward the frantic demon. Ebonbane had nearly destroyed the last of the spirits. In a matter of seconds, Alexi would again face the dark behemoth alone.

Each step forward was sheer agony. His ribs felt as if he had been seared by a branding iron. He couldn't feel the arrow in his right hand because of the injuries that limb had sustained. In his head, visions of nightmarish torment mixed with flashes of pain and death to create a mental cacophony.

Alexi reached Ebonbane as the fiend was about to destroy the last of his ghostly foes. The knight noticed with regret that the spirit was none other than Cassaldra, the ghost who had granted them safe passage through the Phantasmal Forest. As her shimmering body was torn in half by the fiend, her gaze met Alexi's. Something in her eyes pleaded with him—her last hope for vengeance.

Without the pretense of a battle cry, Alexi sprang upon the fiend. He landed on the hulking creature's back, forcing the wings apart and locking his legs tightly onto the obsidian body. He raised the twin arrows high and called out the name of his god, then drove the gleaming tips between the shoulder blades of the seemingly unstoppable beast. Alexi half expected them to shatter as the knife had.

Instead, a brilliant burst of light erupted from the demon where the shafts pierced his body. The warm, comforting glow could only be the holy sunlight of Belenus.

Ebonbane howled in pain and spun around. Alexi lost his hold and found himself slammed away by buffeting wings and flailing arms. He splashed hard in the muddy dirt and slid across it, very nearly ending up inside the still-blazing ruins. As he tried to regain his feet, he saw that the arrows had broken off in his hands. They were useless now.

But perhaps they had already done their work.

Alexi had to shake his head several times to clear his vision. The creature was on his knees, muscular arms and leathery wings lashing wildly about. The shafts had broken off, but the arrowheads were embedded in the fiend's back. Beams of light shone out behind the creature, showing where the glow of truth was consuming its darkness. Scant seconds later, as the tortured screams of its inhuman pain rang in the knight's ears, Ebonbane pitched forward and fell facedown into the mud. The monster tore and clawed at his wounds, but could not ease his torment.

The glow spread outward from the wounds. A hissing sound that reminded Alexi of wet wood in a campfire filled the air. It grew louder as the glow consumed more and more of the fiend's dark body. A final cry of pain was followed by a brilliant flash of light. And then...

Nothing.

Silence.

The body of the fiend was gone, consumed by the holy radiance of Belenus. Alexi silently hoped that the dead would feel their sacrifice had been worth it.

He closed his eyes and listened to the silence.

Only gradually did he become aware that the air was not, indeed, actually quiet. Flames still crackled, although they had nearly finished consuming the last timbers of Shadowborn Manor. Rain splashed in puddles and clapped against wood and rock.

He lay back and let the cool rain fall upon him. In a minute, he would get up and tend to his brother. His own wounds still ached, though, and he needed a moment's rest. He closed his eyes, letting out a long breath.

Almost at once, visions of torment and anguish flooded him. The darkness of Ebonbane swept in, merging with his own spirit. Every evil the fiend ever committed invaded Alexi's being. He saw death. He saw destruction. He saw despair.

As had happened when he defeated the Ghoul Lord and other vile creatures, tremors wracked him as he absorbed Ebonbane's essence of evil. Had he resisted, as he did previously, the sheer magnitude of Ebonbane's malevolence would have killed him. This time, however, Alexi did not reject the experience. He embraced it, drawing the villain into him as he might inhale the scent of smoke from a campfire.

The evil of the fiend, far worse than any he had ever encountered, threatened to drive him mad. But he knew now that containing this great evil was his future. The circumstances of his birth, his training to become a paladin, the Darkening, his journey here—everything in his life had unfolded according to Belenus' plan and come together to prepare him for this noble calling. Just as Kateri Shadowborn had served Belenus even in death, so her son must continue that service in life.

At last the barrage ended. Alexi tried to inhale deeply, despite the crushing weight in his chest. The battle was won. But his own struggle was just beginning.



The voice of evil screamed in Alexi's head.
It demanded freedom.
It demanded obedience.
It demanded despair.

In time, the knight told himself, he would be able to ignore the spirit locked inside his body. In his heart, however, he knew the truth. There was no way to shut out the screaming torrent of blasphemy that clawed always at his thoughts.

He satisfied himself that Ferran would be all right. The boy was still unconscious, but he would come to his senses shortly. Alexi intended to send him home immediately, to get his brother out of this evil place.

Moving about was excruciatingly painful. He had the use of only one leg and arm, and every movement of his torso sent sheets of fire up his spine. As every surge of agony wracked his body, the dark thing within him threatened to overwhelm him. How had Kateri Shadowborn managed to contain that evil for so many years? How would he?

He knew he could never go home.

Somehow the thought didn't upset him. One by one, his friends had been called upon to make sacrifices in the name of righteousness. Now it was his turn. And his loss hardly equaled those of his friends, who had given up their lives to help light triumph over darkness.

He understood his destiny now. He must renounce his status, his heritage, and all that he had lived for in order to protect the world from a terrible storm of darkness. Belenus had asked an enormous sacrifice of him, and he understood now—more than he ever could have as a Knight of the Circle—what it truly meant to serve as his god's champion.

He called for Pitch. They had left their mounts near the front of the manor, some distance away, but the black steed appeared almost at once. Midnight and Ember trotted along a minute or so later. Lysander's mount was nowhere to be seen. Indeed, it had vanished without a trace. Perhaps it had followed the spirit of its master into oblivion.

Alexi struggled to lift the unconscious Ferran onto Pitch's back. It took some time, and a less cooperative beast would have made the task impossible. Like all war-horses, however, Pitch had been trained to carry a wounded rider home from battle. Just as he had finally seated his brother securely in the saddle, Ferran lifted his head and moaned. The sound held both pain and confusion.

"Stay quiet, Ferran," Alexi murmured. "Everything is all right."

The groggy youth opened his eyes, his face lighting up at the sight of his brother. The familiar sight caused a lump to rise in Alexi's throat, and the warrior blinked back tears. "Alexi..." Ferran rasped. "Ebonbane..."

Alexi laid a fond hand on his brother's muddy hair. "He's gone, Ferran. He won't bother our family, or anyone else, again."

"I knew you could do it." His heavy eyes fell closed again as the youth rested his head against Pitch's strong neck.

Alexi bent forward to whisper softly in his brother's ear. "Tell Mother and Father I'm all right. I've just got to be gone for a while."

Ferran's eyes clouded. "Aren't you coming home?" he murmured.

Alexi shook his head. Within him he felt the churning force of evil. “No, Ferran. I can never go home.”

“What will you do?”

“Perhaps...” Alexi stared unseeing at the dark landscape around him. “Perhaps here especially they need paladins of the light. A Circle...” he stepped back and stroked the nose of his beloved horse.

“Take good care of him.” He winced as he inadvertently put too much weight on his broken ankle. “If anyone can get him home, you can.” So saying, he slapped the stallion on the hindquarters. The black destrier broke into a measured trot.

“Get him home safely, Pitch,” Alexi whispered. “It’s the last thing I’ll ever ask of you.”

He stood motionless, watching solemnly as the ebon charger, followed by Dasmaria’s proud steed, carried his brother away. A few minutes of careful trotting brought the horses and rider to the cobblestone road. Looking back, Pitch let out a loud whinny—a last farewell, Alexi knew.

Then they were gone, swallowed up by the shadows.



I am imprisoned.

Instead of being stripped away, my chains have been reforged. This wretch's will is every bit as strong as his mother's. No. It is stronger. He combines the vitality of his spirit with the energy of life itself. I feel weighed down by a burden beyond my experience.

But there is more.

His faith is the equal of any I have encountered. But I have destroyed mortals who were as pious before, destroyed them easily and commanded them to do that which I willed. How can it be that this boy manages to resist me? He has been wounded and battered. His allies have fallen. He is alone, struggling to learn his way around this dark land my evil created, and should be nothing more than despair incarnate.

My fury is unmatched.

I assail him with all my power. I throw images at his mind of things from realms he cannot comprehend. These tactics should have reduced him to madness by now. But they have not. His faith is too strong. The strength of his spirit continues to defy me.

How many creatures have I dominated?

The number is beyond measure. No mortal has ever resisted me, let alone dominated me. This is unprecedented. It cannot happen. Yet it does.

The truth is slow in coming to me.

It seems impossible, but there can be no other explanation. His piety and vitality are indeed formidable things. But it is not these alone that enable him to resist my power. He has a strength unknown among his kind because they are not truly his kin. Inside him resides a darkness that marks him as my own progeny. If he were a mere mortal, he would be lost. But he is more than that, and it is I who made him so. I don't know whether I should scream in rage or laugh at the irony of it.

Yet there is still hope.

The woman grew weak with the passing of the years. She held out longer than I had expected, true, but I defeated her in the end. The same will happen to Alexi Shadowborn. Eventually, his spirit will grow weak and he will falter. He may last longer than she did, but he will grow frail with the passing years. His mortal form will succumb, no matter how much vitality his unholy heritage might grant him. When that happens, victory will be mine.

It is only a matter of time... .

BACK COVER

Once
he had aspired to
become a paladin.

That was before the sun itself refused to shine upon him. Now his holy powers are failing him, his title has been given to another knight, and grim despair mires his every step. If he is to be redeemed, Alexi Shadowborn must discover the source of the curse that blackens his spirit.

The answer lies nearly two decades in the past, when a woman he barely remembers fell at the hands of a diabolical assassin. Somehow the darkness that struck her down has left him unclean in the eyes of the god he desires to serve. But how has her burden become his?

Shadowborn follows Alexi as he travels from the alabaster castles of the Great Kingdom to the blackest regions of Ravenloft in a macabre tale of darkness, despair, and redemption.